Thomas Hardy

A Pair of Blue Eyes

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Содержание

PREFACE 5
Chapter I 7
Chapter II 9
Chapter III 13
Chapter IV 17
Chapter V 23
Chapter VI 28
Chapter VII 32
Chapter VIII 42
Chapter IX 48
Chapter X 53
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 58

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PREFACE

The following chapters were written at a time when the craze for indiscriminate church-restoration had just reached the remotest nooks of western England, where the wild and tragic features of the coast had long combined in perfect harmony with the crude Gothic Art of the ecclesiastical buildings scattered along it, throwing into extraordinary discord all architectural attempts at newness there. To restore the grey carcases of a mediaevalism whose spirit had fled, seemed a not less incongruous act than to set about renovating the adjoining crags themselves.

Hence it happened that an imaginary history of three human hearts, whose emotions were not without correspondence with these material circumstances, found in the ordinary incidents of such church-renovations a fitting frame for its presentation.

The shore and country about 'Castle Boterel' is now getting well known, and will be readily recognized. The spot is, I may add, the furthest westward of all those convenient corners wherein I have ventured to erect my theatre for these imperfect little dramas of country life and passions; and it lies near to, or no great way beyond, the vague border of the Wessex kingdom on that side, which, like the westering verge of modern American settlements, was progressive and uncertain.

This, however, is of little importance. The place is pre-eminently (for one person at least) the region of dream and mystery. The ghostly birds, the pall-like sea, the frothy wind, the eternal soliloquy of the waters, the bloom of dark purple cast, that seems to exhale from the shoreward precipices, in themselves lend to the scene an atmosphere like the twilight of a night vision.

> One enormous sea-bord cliff in particular figures in the narrative; and for some forgotten reason or other this cliff was described in the story as being without a name. Accuracy would require the statement to be that a remarkable cliff which resembles in many points the cliff of the description bears a name that no event has made famous.
>
> *T. H.*

March 1899

THE PERSONS

ELFRIDE SWANCOURT a young Lady
CHRISTOPHER SWANCOURT a Clergyman
STEPHEN SMITH an Architect
HENRY KNIGHT a Reviewer and Essayist
CHARLOTTE TROYTON a rich Widow
GERTRUDE JETHWAY a poor Widow
SPENSER HUGO LUXELLIAN a Peer
LADY LUXELLIAN his Wife
MARY AND KATE two little Girls
WILLIAM WORM a dazed Factotum
JOHN SMITH a Master-mason
JANE SMITH his Wife

MARTIN CANNISTER a Sexton
UNITY a Maid-servant
Other servants, masons, labourers, grooms, nondescripts, etc., etc.

THE SCENE
Mostly on the outskirts of Lower Wessex.

Chapter I

'A fair vestal, throned in the west'

Elfride Swancourt was a girl whose emotions lay very near the surface. Their nature more precisely, and as modified by the creeping hours of time, was known only to those who watched the circumstances of her history.

Personally, she was the combination of very interesting particulars, whose rarity, however, lay in the combination itself rather than in the individual elements combined. As a matter of fact, you did not see the form and substance of her features when conversing with her; and this charming power of preventing a material study of her lineaments by an interlocutor, originated not in the cloaking effect of a well-formed manner (for her manner was childish and scarcely formed), but in the attractive crudeness of the remarks themselves. She had lived all her life in retirement – the monstrari gigito of idle men had not flattered her, and at the age of nineteen or twenty she was no further on in social consciousness than an urban young lady of fifteen.

One point in her, however, you did notice: that was her eyes. In them was seen a sublimation of all of her; it was not necessary to look further: there she lived.

These eyes were blue; blue as autumn distance – blue as the blue we see between the retreating mouldings of hills and woody slopes on a sunny September morning. A misty and shady blue, that had no beginning or surface, and was looked INTO rather than AT.

As to her presence, it was not powerful; it was weak. Some women can make their personality pervade the atmosphere of a whole banqueting hall; Elfride's was no more pervasive than that of a kitten.

Elfride had as her own the thoughtfulness which appears in the face of the Madonna della Sedia, without its rapture: the warmth and spirit of the type of woman's feature most common to the beauties – mortal and immortal – of Rubens, without their insistent fleshiness. The characteristic expression of the female faces of Correggio – that of the yearning human thoughts that lie too deep for tears – was hers sometimes, but seldom under ordinary conditions.

The point in Elfride Swancourt's life at which a deeper current may be said to have permanently set in, was one winter afternoon when she found herself standing, in the character of hostess, face to face with a man she had never seen before – moreover, looking at him with a Miranda-like curiosity and interest that she had never yet bestowed on a mortal.

On this particular day her father, the vicar of a parish on the sea-swept outskirts of Lower Wessex, and a widower, was suffering from an attack of gout. After finishing her household supervisions Elfride became restless, and several times left the room, ascended the staircase, and knocked at her father's chamber-door.

'Come in!' was always answered in a hearty out-of-door voice from the inside.

'Papa,' she said on one occasion to the fine, red-faced, handsome man of forty, who, puffing and fizzing like a bursting bottle, lay on the bed wrapped in a dressing-gown, and every now and then enunciating, in spite of himself, about one letter of some word or words that were almost oaths; 'papa, will you not come downstairs this evening?' She spoke distinctly: he was rather deaf.

'Afraid not – eh-hh! – very much afraid I shall not, Elfride. Piph-ph-ph! I can't bear even a handkerchief upon this deuced toe of mine, much less a stocking or slipper – piph-ph-ph! There 'tis again! No, I shan't get up till to-morrow.'

'Then I hope this London man won't come; for I don't know what I should do, papa.'

'Well, it would be awkward, certainly.'

'I should hardly think he would come to-day.'

'Why?'

'Because the wind blows so.'

'Wind! What ideas you have, Elfride! Who ever heard of wind stopping a man from doing his business? The idea of this toe of mine coming on so suddenly!..If he should come, you must send him up to me, I suppose, and then give him some food and put him to bed in some way. Dear me, what a nuisance all this is!'

'Must he have dinner?'

'Too heavy for a tired man at the end of a tedious journey.'

'Tea, then?'

'Not substantial enough.'

'High tea, then? There is cold fowl, rabbit-pie, some pasties, and things of that kind.'

'Yes, high tea.'

'Must I pour out his tea, papa?'

'Of course; you are the mistress of the house.'

'What! sit there all the time with a stranger, just as if I knew him, and not anybody to introduce us?'

'Nonsense, child, about introducing; you know better than that. A practical professional man, tired and hungry, who has been travelling ever since daylight this morning, will hardly be inclined to talk and air courtesies to-night. He wants food and shelter, and you must see that he has it, simply because I am suddenly laid up and cannot. There is nothing so dreadful in that, I hope? You get all kinds of stuff into your head from reading so many of those novels.'

'Oh no; there is nothing dreadful in it when it becomes plainly a case of necessity like this. But, you see, you are always there when people come to dinner, even if we know them; and this is some strange London man of the world, who will think it odd, perhaps.'

'Very well; let him.'

'Is he Mr. Hewby's partner?'

'I should scarcely think so: he may be.'

'How old is he, I wonder?'

'That I cannot tell. You will find the copy of my letter to Mr. Hewby, and his answer, upon the table in the study. You may read them, and then you'll know as much as I do about our visitor.'

'I have read them.'

'Well, what's the use of asking questions, then? They contain all I know. Ugh-h-h!..Od plague you, you young scamp! don't put anything there! I can't bear the weight of a fly.'

'Oh, I am sorry, papa. I forgot; I thought you might be cold,' she said, hastily removing the rug she had thrown upon the feet of the sufferer; and waiting till she saw that consciousness of her offence had passed from his face, she withdrew from the room, and retired again downstairs.

Chapter II

'Twas on the evening of a winter's day.'

When two or three additional hours had merged the same afternoon in evening, some moving outlines might have been observed against the sky on the summit of a wild lone hill in that district. They circumscribed two men, having at present the aspect of silhouettes, sitting in a dog-cart and pushing along in the teeth of the wind. Scarcely a solitary house or man had been visible along the whole dreary distance of open country they were traversing; and now that night had begun to fall, the faint twilight, which still gave an idea of the landscape to their observation, was enlivened by the quiet appearance of the planet Jupiter, momentarily gleaming in intenser brilliancy in front of them, and by Sirius shedding his rays in rivalry from his position over their shoulders. The only lights apparent on earth were some spots of dull red, glowing here and there upon the distant hills, which, as the driver of the vehicle gratuitously remarked to the hirer, were smouldering fires for the consumption of peat and gorse-roots, where the common was being broken up for agricultural purposes. The wind prevailed with but little abatement from its daytime boisterousness, three or four small clouds, delicate and pale, creeping along under the sky southward to the Channel.

Fourteen of the sixteen miles intervening between the railway terminus and the end of their journey had been gone over, when they began to pass along the brink of a valley some miles in extent, wherein the wintry skeletons of a more luxuriant vegetation than had hitherto surrounded them proclaimed an increased richness of soil, which showed signs of far more careful enclosure and management than had any slopes they had yet passed. A little farther, and an opening in the elms stretching up from this fertile valley revealed a mansion.

'That's Endelstow House, Lord Luxellian's,' said the driver.

'Endelstow House, Lord Luxellian's,' repeated the other mechanically. He then turned himself sideways, and keenly scrutinized the almost invisible house with an interest which the indistinct picture itself seemed far from adequate to create. 'Yes, that's Lord Luxellian's,' he said yet again after a while, as he still looked in the same direction.

'What, be we going there?'

'No; Endelstow Vicarage, as I have told you.'

'I thought you m't have altered your mind, sir, as ye have stared that way at nothing so long.'

'Oh no; I am interested in the house, that's all.'

'Most people be, as the saying is.'

'Not in the sense that I am.'

'Oh!..Well, his family is no better than my own, 'a b'lieve.'

'How is that?'

'Hedgers and ditchers by rights. But once in ancient times one of 'em, when he was at work, changed clothes with King Charles the Second, and saved the king's life. King Charles came up to him like a common man, and said off-hand, "Man in the smock-frock, my name is Charles the Second, and that's the truth on't. Will you lend me your clothes?" "I don't mind if I do," said Hedger Luxellian; and they changed there and then. "Now mind ye," King Charles the Second said, like a common man, as he rode away, "if ever I come to the crown, you come to court, knock at the door, and say out bold, 'Is King Charles the Second at home?' Tell your name, and they shall let you in, and you shall be made a lord." Now, that was very nice of Master Charley?'

'Very nice indeed.'

'Well, as the story is, the king came to the throne; and some years after that, away went Hedger Luxellian, knocked at the king's door, and asked if King Charles the Second was in. "No, he isn't,"

they said. "Then, is Charles the Third?" said Hedger Luxellian. "Yes," said a young feller standing by like a common man, only he had a crown on, "my name is Charles the Third." And – '

'I really fancy that must be a mistake. I don't recollect anything in English history about Charles the Third,' said the other in a tone of mild remonstrance.

'Oh, that's right history enough, only 'twasn't prented; he was rather a queer-tempered man, if you remember.'

'Very well; go on.'

'And, by hook or by crook, Hedger Luxellian was made a lord, and everything went on well till some time after, when he got into a most terrible row with King Charles the Fourth.

'I can't stand Charles the Fourth. Upon my word, that's too much.'

'Why? There was a George the Fourth, wasn't there?'

'Certainly.'

'Well, Charleses be as common as Georges. However I'll say no more about it…Ah, well! 'tis the funniest world ever I lived in – upon my life 'tis. Ah, that such should be!'

The dusk had thickened into darkness while they thus conversed, and the outline and surface of the mansion gradually disappeared. The windows, which had before been as black blots on a lighter expanse of wall, became illuminated, and were transfigured to squares of light on the general dark body of the night landscape as it absorbed the outlines of the edifice into its gloomy monochrome.

Not another word was spoken for some time, and they climbed a hill, then another hill piled on the summit of the first. An additional mile of plateau followed, from which could be discerned two light-houses on the coast they were nearing, reposing on the horizon with a calm lustre of benignity. Another oasis was reached; a little dell lay like a nest at their feet, towards which the driver pulled the horse at a sharp angle, and descended a steep slope which dived under the trees like a rabbit's burrow. They sank lower and lower.

'Endelstow Vicarage is inside here,' continued the man with the reins. 'This part about here is West Endelstow; Lord Luxellian's is East Endelstow, and has a church to itself. Pa'son Swancourt is the pa'son of both, and bobs backward and forward. Ah, well! 'tis a funny world. 'A b'lieve there was once a quarry where this house stands. The man who built it in past time scraped all the glebe for earth to put round the vicarage, and laid out a little paradise of flowers and trees in the soil he had got together in this way, whilst the fields he scraped have been good for nothing ever since.'

'How long has the present incumbent been here?'

'Maybe about a year, or a year and half: 'tisn't two years; for they don't scandalize him yet; and, as a rule, a parish begins to scandalize the pa'son at the end of two years among 'em familiar. But he's a very nice party. Ay, Pa'son Swancourt knows me pretty well from often driving over; and I know Pa'son Swancourt.'

They emerged from the bower, swept round in a curve, and the chimneys and gables of the vicarage became darkly visible. Not a light showed anywhere. They alighted; the man felt his way into the porch, and rang the bell.

At the end of three or four minutes, spent in patient waiting without hearing any sounds of a response, the stranger advanced and repeated the call in a more decided manner. He then fancied he heard footsteps in the hall, and sundry movements of the door-knob, but nobody appeared.

'Perhaps they beant at home,' sighed the driver. 'And I promised myself a bit of supper in Pa'son Swancourt's kitchen. Sich lovely mate-pize and figged keakes, and cider, and drops o' cordial that they do keep here!'

'All right, naibours! Be ye rich men or be ye poor men, that ye must needs come to the world's end at this time o' night?' exclaimed a voice at this instant; and, turning their heads, they saw a rickety individual shambling round from the back door with a horn lantern dangling from his hand.

'Time o' night, 'a b'lieve! and the clock only gone seven of 'em. Show a light, and let us in, William Worm.'

'Oh, that you, Robert Lickpan?'

'Nobody else, William Worm.'

'And is the visiting man a-come?'

'Yes,' said the stranger. 'Is Mr. Swancourt at home?'

'That 'a is, sir. And would ye mind coming round by the back way? The front door is got stuck wi' the wet, as he will do sometimes; and the Turk can't open en. I know I am only a poor wambling man that 'ill never pay the Lord for my making, sir; but I can show the way in, sir.'

The new arrival followed his guide through a little door in a wall, and then promenaded a scullery and a kitchen, along which he passed with eyes rigidly fixed in advance, an inbred horror of prying forbidding him to gaze around apartments that formed the back side of the household tapestry. Entering the hall, he was about to be shown to his room, when from the inner lobby of the front entrance, whither she had gone to learn the cause of the delay, sailed forth the form of Elfride. Her start of amazement at the sight of the visitor coming forth from under the stairs proved that she had not been expecting this surprising flank movement, which had been originated entirely by the ingenuity of William Worm.

She appeared in the prettiest of all feminine guises, that is to say, in demi-toilette, with plenty of loose curly hair tumbling down about her shoulders. An expression of uneasiness pervaded her countenance; and altogether she scarcely appeared woman enough for the situation. The visitor removed his hat, and the first words were spoken; Elfride prelusively looking with a deal of interest, not unmixed with surprise, at the person towards whom she was to do the duties of hospitality.

'I am Mr. Smith,' said the stranger in a musical voice.

'I am Miss Swancourt,' said Elfride.

Her constraint was over. The great contrast between the reality she beheld before her, and the dark, taciturn, sharp, elderly man of business who had lurked in her imagination – a man with clothes smelling of city smoke, skin sallow from want of sun, and talk flavoured with epigram – was such a relief to her that Elfride smiled, almost laughed, in the new-comer's face.

Stephen Smith, who has hitherto been hidden from us by the darkness, was at this time of his life but a youth in appearance, and barely a man in years. Judging from his look, London was the last place in the world that one would have imagined to be the scene of his activities: such a face surely could not be nourished amid smoke and mud and fog and dust; such an open countenance could never even have seen anything of 'the weariness, the fever, and the fret' of Babylon the Second.

His complexion was as fine as Elfride's own; the pink of his cheeks as delicate. His mouth as perfect as Cupid's bow in form, and as cherry-red in colour as hers. Bright curly hair; bright sparkling blue-gray eyes; a boy's blush and manner; neither whisker nor moustache, unless a little light-brown fur on his upper lip deserved the latter title: this composed the London professional man, the prospect of whose advent had so troubled Elfride.

Elfride hastened to say she was sorry to tell him that Mr. Swancourt was not able to receive him that evening, and gave the reason why. Mr. Smith replied, in a voice boyish by nature and manly by art, that he was very sorry to hear this news; but that as far as his reception was concerned, it did not matter in the least.

Stephen was shown up to his room. In his absence Elfride stealthily glided into her father's.

'He's come, papa. Such a young man for a business man!'

'Oh, indeed!'

'His face is – well – PRETTY; just like mine.'

'H'm! what next?'

'Nothing; that's all I know of him yet. It is rather nice, is it not?'

'Well, we shall see that when we know him better. Go down and give the poor fellow something to eat and drink, for Heaven's sake. And when he has done eating, say I should like to have a few words with him, if he doesn't mind coming up here.'

The young lady glided downstairs again, and whilst she awaits young Smith's entry, the letters referring to his visit had better be given.

1. – MR. SWANCOURT TO MR. HEWBY.

'ENDELSTOW VICARAGE, Feb. 18, 18 – .

'SIR, – We are thinking of restoring the tower and aisle of the church in this parish; and Lord Luxellian, the patron of the living, has mentioned your name as that of a trustworthy architect whom it would be desirable to ask to superintend the work.

'I am exceedingly ignorant of the necessary preliminary steps. Probably, however, the first is that (should you be, as Lord Luxellian says you are, disposed to assist us) yourself or some member of your staff come and see the building, and report thereupon for the satisfaction of parishioners and others.

'The spot is a very remote one: we have no railway within fourteen miles; and the nearest place for putting up at – called a town, though merely a large village – is Castle Boterel, two miles further on; so that it would be most convenient for you to stay at the vicarage – which I am glad to place at your disposal – instead of pushing on to the hotel at Castle Boterel, and coming back again in the morning.

'Any day of the next week that you like to name for the visit will find us quite ready to receive you. – Yours very truly,

CHRISTOPHER SWANCOURT. 2. – MR. HEWBY TO MR. SWANCOURT.

"PERCY PLACE, CHARING CROSS, Feb. 20, 18 – .

'DEAR SIR, – Agreeably to your request of the 18th instant, I have arranged to survey and make drawings of the aisle and tower of your parish church, and of the dilapidations which have been suffered to accrue thereto, with a view to its restoration.

'My assistant, Mr. Stephen Smith, will leave London by the early train to-morrow morning for the purpose. Many thanks for your proposal to accommodate him. He will take advantage of your offer, and will probably reach your house at some hour of the evening. You may put every confidence in him, and may rely upon his discernment in the matter of church architecture.

'Trusting that the plans for the restoration, which I shall prepare from the details of his survey, will prove satisfactory to yourself and Lord Luxellian, I am, dear sir, yours faithfully,

WALTER HEWBY.'

Chapter III

'Melodious birds sing madrigals'

That first repast in Endelstow Vicarage was a very agreeable one to young Stephen Smith. The table was spread, as Elfride had suggested to her father, with the materials for the heterogeneous meal called high tea – a class of refection welcome to all when away from men and towns, and particularly attractive to youthful palates. The table was prettily decked with winter flowers and leaves, amid which the eye was greeted by chops, chicken, pie, &c., and two huge pasties overhanging the sides of the dish with a cheerful aspect of abundance.

At the end, towards the fireplace, appeared the tea-service, of old-fashioned Worcester porcelain, and behind this arose the slight form of Elfride, attempting to add matronly dignity to the movement of pouring out tea, and to have a weighty and concerned look in matters of marmalade, honey, and clotted cream. Having made her own meal before he arrived, she found to her embarrassment that there was nothing left for her to do but talk when not assisting him. She asked him if he would excuse her finishing a letter she had been writing at a side-table, and, after sitting down to it, tingled with a sense of being grossly rude. However, seeing that he noticed nothing personally wrong in her, and that he too was embarrassed when she attentively watched his cup to refill it, Elfride became better at ease; and when furthermore he accidentally kicked the leg of the table, and then nearly upset his tea-cup, just as schoolboys did, she felt herself mistress of the situation, and could talk very well. In a few minutes ingenuousness and a common term of years obliterated all recollection that they were strangers just met. Stephen began to wax eloquent on extremely slight experiences connected with his professional pursuits; and she, having no experiences to fall back upon, recounted with much animation stories that had been related to her by her father, which would have astonished him had he heard with what fidelity of action and tone they were rendered. Upon the whole, a very interesting picture of Sweet-and-Twenty was on view that evening in Mr. Swancourt's house.

Ultimately Stephen had to go upstairs and talk loud to the vicar, receiving from him between his puffs a great many apologies for calling him so unceremoniously to a stranger's bedroom. 'But,' continued Mr. Swancourt, 'I felt that I wanted to say a few words to you before the morning, on the business of your visit. One's patience gets exhausted by staying a prisoner in bed all day through a sudden freak of one's enemy – new to me, though – for I have known very little of gout as yet. However, he's gone to my other toe in a very mild manner, and I expect he'll slink off altogether by the morning. I hope you have been well attended to downstairs?'

'Perfectly. And though it is unfortunate, and I am sorry to see you laid up, I beg you will not take the slightest notice of my being in the house the while.'

'I will not. But I shall be down to-morrow. My daughter is an excellent doctor. A dose or two of her mild mixtures will fetch me round quicker than all the drug stuff in the world. Well, now about the church business. Take a seat, do. We can't afford to stand upon ceremony in these parts as you see, and for this reason, that a civilized human being seldom stays long with us; and so we cannot waste time in approaching him, or he will be gone before we have had the pleasure of close acquaintance. This tower of ours is, as you will notice, entirely gone beyond the possibility of restoration; but the church itself is well enough. You should see some of the churches in this county. Floors rotten: ivy lining the walls.'

'Dear me!'

'Oh, that's nothing. The congregation of a neighbour of mine, whenever a storm of rain comes on during service, open their umbrellas and hold them up till the dripping ceases from the roof. Now, if you will kindly bring me those papers and letters you see lying on the table, I will show you how far we have got.'

Stephen crossed the room to fetch them, and the vicar seemed to notice more particularly the slim figure of his visitor.

'I suppose you are quite competent?' he said.

'Quite,' said the young man, colouring slightly.

'You are very young, I fancy – I should say you are not more than nineteen?'

I am nearly twenty-one.'

'Exactly half my age; I am forty-two.'

'By the way,' said Mr. Swancourt, after some conversation, 'you said your whole name was Stephen Fitzmaurice, and that your grandfather came originally from Caxbury. Since I have been speaking, it has occurred to me that I know something of you. You belong to a well-known ancient county family – not ordinary Smiths in the least.'

'I don't think we have any of their blood in our veins.'

'Nonsense! you must. Hand me the "Landed Gentry." Now, let me see. There, Stephen Fitzmaurice Smith – he lies in St. Mary's Church, doesn't he? Well, out of that family Sprang the Leaseworthy Smiths, and collaterally came General Sir Stephen Fitzmaurice Smith of Caxbury – '

'Yes; I have seen his monument there,' shouted Stephen. 'But there is no connection between his family and mine: there cannot be.'

'There is none, possibly, to your knowledge. But look at this, my dear sir,' said the vicar, striking his fist upon the bedpost for emphasis. 'Here are you, Stephen Fitzmaurice Smith, living in London, but springing from Caxbury. Here in this book is a genealogical tree of the Stephen Fitzmaurice Smiths of Caxbury Manor. You may be only a family of professional men now – I am not inquisitive: I don't ask questions of that kind; it is not in me to do so – but it is as plain as the nose in your face that there's your origin! And, Mr. Smith, I congratulate you upon your blood; blue blood, sir; and, upon my life, a very desirable colour, as the world goes.'

'I wish you could congratulate me upon some more tangible quality,' said the younger man, sadly no less than modestly.

'Nonsense! that will come with time. You are young: all your life is before you. Now look – see how far back in the mists of antiquity my own family of Swancourt have a root. Here, you see,' he continued, turning to the page, 'is Geoffrey, the one among my ancestors who lost a barony because he would cut his joke. Ah, it's the sort of us! But the story is too long to tell now. Ay, I'm a poor man – a poor gentleman, in fact: those I would be friends with, won't be friends with me; those who are willing to be friends with me, I am above being friends with. Beyond dining with a neighbouring incumbent or two, and an occasional chat – sometimes dinner – with Lord Luxellian, a connection of mine, I am in absolute solitude – absolute.'

'You have your studies, your books, and your – daughter.'

'Oh yes, yes; and I don't complain of poverty. Canto coram latrone. Well, Mr. Smith, don't let me detain you any longer in a sick room. Ha! that reminds me of a story I once heard in my younger days.' Here the vicar began a series of small private laughs, and Stephen looked inquiry. 'Oh, no, no! it is too bad – too bad to tell!' continued Mr. Swancourt in undertones of grim mirth. 'Well, go downstairs; my daughter must do the best she can with you this evening. Ask her to sing to you – she plays and sings very nicely. Good-night; I feel as if I had known you for five or six years. I'll ring for somebody to show you down.'

'Never mind,' said Stephen, 'I can find the way.' And he went downstairs, thinking of the delightful freedom of manner in the remoter counties in comparison with the reserve of London.

'I forgot to tell you that my father was rather deaf,' said Elfride anxiously, when Stephen entered the little drawing-room.

'Never mind; I know all about it, and we are great friends,' the man of business replied enthusiastically. 'And, Miss Swancourt, will you kindly sing to me?'

To Miss Swancourt this request seemed, what in fact it was, exceptionally point-blank; though she guessed that her father had some hand in framing it, knowing, rather to her cost, of his unceremonious way of utilizing her for the benefit of dull sojourners. At the same time, as Mr. Smith's manner was too frank to provoke criticism, and his age too little to inspire fear, she was ready – not to say pleased – to accede. Selecting from the canterbury some old family ditties, that in years gone by had been played and sung by her mother, Elfride sat down to the pianoforte, and began, ''Twas on the evening of a winter's day,' in a pretty contralto voice.

'Do you like that old thing, Mr. Smith?' she said at the end.

'Yes, I do much,' said Stephen – words he would have uttered, and sincerely, to anything on earth, from glee to requiem, that she might have chosen.

'You shall have a little one by De Leyre, that was given me by a young French lady who was staying at Endelstow House:

'"Je l'ai plante, je l'ai vu naitre,
Ce beau rosier ou les oiseaux," &c.;

and then I shall want to give you my own favourite for the very last, Shelley's "When the lamp is shattered," as set to music by my poor mother. I so much like singing to anybody who REALLY cares to hear me.'

Every woman who makes a permanent impression on a man is usually recalled to his mind's eye as she appeared in one particular scene, which seems ordained to be her special form of manifestation throughout the pages of his memory. As the patron Saint has her attitude and accessories in mediaeval illumination, so the sweetheart may be said to have hers upon the table of her true Love's fancy, without which she is rarely introduced there except by effort; and this though she may, on further acquaintance, have been observed in many other phases which one would imagine to be far more appropriate to love's young dream.

Miss Elfride's image chose the form in which she was beheld during these minutes of singing, for her permanent attitude of visitation to Stephen's eyes during his sleeping and waking hours in after days. The profile is seen of a young woman in a pale gray silk dress with trimmings of swan's-down, and opening up from a point in front, like a waistcoat without a shirt; the cool colour contrasting admirably with the warm bloom of her neck and face. The furthermost candle on the piano comes immediately in a line with her head, and half invisible itself, forms the accidentally frizzled hair into a nebulous haze of light, surrounding her crown like an aureola. Her hands are in their place on the keys, her lips parted, and trilling forth, in a tender diminuendo, the closing words of the sad apostrophe:

'O Love, who bewailest
The frailty of all things here,
Why choose you the frailest
For your cradle, your home, and your bier!'

Her head is forward a little, and her eyes directed keenly upward to the top of the page of music confronting her. Then comes a rapid look into Stephen's face, and a still more rapid look back again to her business, her face having dropped its sadness, and acquired a certain expression of mischievous archness the while; which lingered there for some time, but was never developed into a positive smile of flirtation.

Stephen suddenly shifted his position from her right hand to her left, where there was just room enough for a small ottoman to stand between the piano and the corner of the room. Into this nook he squeezed himself, and gazed wistfully up into Elfride's face. So long and so earnestly gazed he, that her cheek deepened to a more and more crimson tint as each line was added to her song. Concluding,

and pausing motionless after the last word for a minute or two, she ventured to look at him again. His features wore an expression of unutterable heaviness.

'You don't hear many songs, do you, Mr. Smith, to take so much notice of these of mine?'

'Perhaps it was the means and vehicle of the song that I was noticing: I mean yourself,' he answered gently.

'Now, Mr. Smith!'

'It is perfectly true; I don't hear much singing. You mistake what I am, I fancy. Because I come as a stranger to a secluded spot, you think I must needs come from a life of bustle, and know the latest movements of the day. But I don't. My life is as quiet as yours, and more solitary; solitary as death.'

'The death which comes from a plethora of life? But seriously, I can quite see that you are not the least what I thought you would be before I saw you. You are not critical, or experienced, or – much to mind. That's why I don't mind singing airs to you that I only half know.' Finding that by this confession she had vexed him in a way she did not intend, she added naively, 'I mean, Mr. Smith, that you are better, not worse, for being only young and not very experienced. You don't think my life here so very tame and dull, I know.'

'I do not, indeed,' he said with fervour. 'It must be delightfully poetical, and sparkling, and fresh, and – '

'There you go, Mr. Smith! Well, men of another kind, when I get them to be honest enough to own the truth, think just the reverse: that my life must be a dreadful bore in its normal state, though pleasant for the exceptional few days they pass here.'

'I could live here always!' he said, and with such a tone and look of unconscious revelation that Elfride was startled to find that her harmonies had fired a small Troy, in the shape of Stephen's heart. She said quickly:

'But you can't live here always.'

'Oh no.' And he drew himself in with the sensitiveness of a snail.

Elfride's emotions were sudden as his in kindling, but the least of woman's lesser infirmities – love of admiration – caused an inflammable disposition on his part, so exactly similar to her own, to appear as meritorious in him as modesty made her own seem culpable in her.

Chapter IV

'Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap.'

For reasons of his own, Stephen Smith was stirring a short time after dawn the next morning. From the window of his room he could see, first, two bold escarpments sloping down together like the letter V. Towards the bottom, like liquid in a funnel, appeared the sea, gray and small. On the brow of one hill, of rather greater altitude than its neighbour, stood the church which was to be the scene of his operations. The lonely edifice was black and bare, cutting up into the sky from the very tip of the hill. It had a square mouldering tower, owning neither battlement nor pinnacle, and seemed a monolithic termination, of one substance with the ridge, rather than a structure raised thereon. Round the church ran a low wall; over-topping the wall in general level was the graveyard; not as a graveyard usually is, a fragment of landscape with its due variety of chiaro-oscuro, but a mere profile against the sky, serrated with the outlines of graves and a very few memorial stones. Not a tree could exist up there: nothing but the monotonous gray-green grass.

Five minutes after this casual survey was made his bedroom was empty, and its occupant had vanished quietly from the house.

At the end of two hours he was again in the room, looking warm and glowing. He now pursued the artistic details of dressing, which on his first rising had been entirely omitted. And a very blooming boy he looked, after that mysterious morning scamper. His mouth was a triumph of its class. It was the cleanly-cut, piquantly pursed-up mouth of William Pitt, as represented in the well or little known bust by Nollekens – a mouth which is in itself a young man's fortune, if properly exercised. His round chin, where its upper part turned inward, still continued its perfect and full curve, seeming to press in to a point the bottom of his nether lip at their place of junction.

Once he murmured the name of Elfride. Ah, there she was! On the lawn in a plain dress, without hat or bonnet, running with a boy's velocity, superadded to a girl's lightness, after a tame rabbit she was endeavouring to capture, her strategic intonations of coaxing words alternating with desperate rushes so much out of keeping with them, that the hollowness of such expressions was but too evident to her pet, who darted and dodged in carefully timed counterpart.

The scene down there was altogether different from that of the hills. A thicket of shrubs and trees enclosed the favoured spot from the wilderness without; even at this time of the year the grass was luxuriant there. No wind blew inside the protecting belt of evergreens, wasting its force upon the higher and stronger trees forming the outer margin of the grove.

Then he heard a heavy person shuffling about in slippers, and calling 'Mr. Smith!' Smith proceeded to the study, and found Mr. Swancourt. The young man expressed his gladness to see his host downstairs.

'Oh yes; I knew I should soon be right again. I have not made the acquaintance of gout for more than two years, and it generally goes off the second night. Well, where have you been this morning? I saw you come in just now, I think!'

'Yes; I have been for a walk.'

'Start early?'

'Yes.'

'Very early, I think?'

'Yes, it was rather early.'

'Which way did you go? To the sea, I suppose. Everybody goes seaward.'

'No; I followed up the river as far as the park wall.'

'You are different from your kind. Well, I suppose such a wild place is a novelty, and so tempted you out of bed?'

'Not altogether a novelty. I like it.'

The youth seemed averse to explanation.

'You must, you must; to go cock-watching the morning after a journey of fourteen or sixteen hours. But there's no accounting for tastes, and I am glad to see that yours are no meaner. After breakfast, but not before, I shall be good for a ten miles' walk, Master Smith.'

Certainly there seemed nothing exaggerated in that assertion. Mr. Swancourt by daylight showed himself to be a man who, in common with the other two people under his roof, had really strong claims to be considered handsome, – handsome, that is, in the sense in which the moon is bright: the ravines and valleys which, on a close inspection, are seen to diversify its surface being left out of the argument. His face was of a tint that never deepened upon his cheeks nor lightened upon his forehead, but remained uniform throughout; the usual neutral salmon-colour of a man who feeds well – not to say too well – and does not think hard; every pore being in visible working order. His tout ensemble was that of a highly improved class of farmer, dressed up in the wrong clothes; that of a firm-standing perpendicular man, whose fall would have been backwards in direction if he had ever lost his balance.

The vicar's background was at present what a vicar's background should be, his study. Here the consistency ends. All along the chimneypiece were ranged bottles of horse, pig, and cow medicines, and against the wall was a high table, made up of the fragments of an old oak Iychgate. Upon this stood stuffed specimens of owls, divers, and gulls, and over them bunches of wheat and barley ears, labelled with the date of the year that produced them. Some cases and shelves, more or less laden with books, the prominent titles of which were Dr. Brown's 'Notes on the Romans,' Dr. Smith's 'Notes on the Corinthians,' and Dr. Robinson's 'Notes on the Galatians, Ephesians, and Philippians,' just saved the character of the place, in spite of a girl's doll's-house standing above them, a marine aquarium in the window, and Elfride's hat hanging on its corner.

'Business, business!' said Mr. Swancourt after breakfast. He began to find it necessary to act the part of a fly-wheel towards the somewhat irregular forces of his visitor.

They prepared to go to the church; the vicar, on second thoughts, mounting his coal-black mare to avoid exerting his foot too much at starting. Stephen said he should want a man to assist him. 'Worm!' the vicar shouted.

A minute or two after a voice was heard round the corner of the building, mumbling, 'Ah, I used to be strong enough, but 'tis altered now! Well, there, I'm as independent as one here and there, even if they do write 'squire after their names.'

'What's the matter?' said the vicar, as William Worm appeared; when the remarks were repeated to him.

'Worm says some very true things sometimes,' Mr. Swancourt said, turning to Stephen. 'Now, as regards that word "esquire." Why, Mr. Smith, that word "esquire" is gone to the dogs, – used on the letters of every jackanapes who has a black coat. Anything else, Worm?'

'Ay, the folk have begun frying again!'

'Dear me! I'm sorry to hear that.'

'Yes,' Worm said groaningly to Stephen, 'I've got such a noise in my head that there's no living night nor day. 'Tis just for all the world like people frying fish: fry, fry, fry, all day long in my poor head, till I don't know whe'r I'm here or yonder. There, God A'mighty will find it out sooner or later, I hope, and relieve me.'

'Now, my deafness,' said Mr. Swancourt impressively, 'is a dead silence; but William Worm's is that of people frying fish in his head. Very remarkable, isn't it?'

'I can hear the frying-pan a-fizzing as naterel as life,' said Worm corroboratively.

'Yes, it is remarkable,' said Mr. Smith.

'Very peculiar, very peculiar,' echoed the vicar; and they all then followed the path up the hill, bounded on each side by a little stone wall, from which gleamed fragments of quartz and blood-red

marbles, apparently of inestimable value, in their setting of brown alluvium. Stephen walked with the dignity of a man close to the horse's head, Worm stumbled along a stone's throw in the rear, and Elfride was nowhere in particular, yet everywhere; sometimes in front, sometimes behind, sometimes at the sides, hovering about the procession like a butterfly; not definitely engaged in travelling, yet somehow chiming in at points with the general progress.

The vicar explained things as he went on: 'The fact is, Mr. Smith, I didn't want this bother of church restoration at all, but it was necessary to do something in self-defence, on account of those d – dissenters: I use the word in its scriptural meaning, of course, not as an expletive.'

'How very odd!' said Stephen, with the concern demanded of serious friendliness.

'Odd? That's nothing to how it is in the parish of Twinkley. Both the churchwardens are – ; there, I won't say what they are; and the clerk and the sexton as well.'

'How very strange!' said Stephen.

'Strange? My dear sir, that's nothing to how it is in the parish of Sinnerton. However, as to our own parish, I hope we shall make some progress soon.'

'You must trust to circumstances.'

'There are no circumstances to trust to. We may as well trust in Providence if we trust at all. But here we are. A wild place, isn't it? But I like it on such days as these.'

The churchyard was entered on this side by a stone stile, over which having clambered, you remained still on the wild hill, the within not being so divided from the without as to obliterate the sense of open freedom. A delightful place to be buried in, postulating that delight can accompany a man to his tomb under any circumstances. There was nothing horrible in this churchyard, in the shape of tight mounds bonded with sticks, which shout imprisonment in the ears rather than whisper rest; or trim garden-flowers, which only raise images of people in new black crape and white handkerchiefs coming to tend them; or wheel-marks, which remind us of hearses and mourning coaches; or cypress-bushes, which make a parade of sorrow; or coffin-boards and bones lying behind trees, showing that we are only leaseholders of our graves. No; nothing but long, wild, untutored grass, diversifying the forms of the mounds it covered, – themselves irregularly shaped, with no eye to effect; the impressive presence of the old mountain that all this was a part of being nowhere excluded by disguising art. Outside were similar slopes and similar grass; and then the serene impassive sea, visible to a width of half the horizon, and meeting the eye with the effect of a vast concave, like the interior of a blue vessel. Detached rocks stood upright afar, a collar of foam girding their bases, and repeating in its whiteness the plumage of a countless multitude of gulls that restlessly hovered about.

'Now, Worm!' said Mr. Swancourt sharply; and Worm started into an attitude of attention at once to receive orders. Stephen and himself were then left in possession, and the work went on till early in the afternoon, when dinner was announced by Unity of the vicarage kitchen running up the hill without a bonnet.

Elfride did not make her appearance inside the building till late in the afternoon, and came then by special invitation from Stephen during dinner. She looked so intensely LIVING and full of movement as she came into the old silent place, that young Smith's world began to be lit by 'the purple light' in all its definiteness. Worm was got rid of by sending him to measure the height of the tower.

What could she do but come close – so close that a minute arc of her skirt touched his foot – and asked him how he was getting on with his sketches, and set herself to learn the principles of practical mensuration as applied to irregular buildings? Then she must ascend the pulpit to re-imagine for the hundredth time how it would seem to be a preacher.

Presently she leant over the front of the pulpit.

'Don't you tell papa, will you, Mr. Smith, if I tell you something?' she said with a sudden impulse to make a confidence.

'Oh no, that I won't,' said he, staring up.

'Well, I write papa's sermons for him very often, and he preaches them better than he does his own; and then afterwards he talks to people and to me about what he said in his sermon to-day, and forgets that I wrote it for him. Isn't it absurd?'

'How clever you must be!' said Stephen. 'I couldn't write a sermon for the world.'

'Oh, it's easy enough,' she said, descending from the pulpit and coming close to him to explain more vividly. 'You do it like this. Did you ever play a game of forfeits called "When is it? where is it? what is it?"'

'No, never.'

'Ah, that's a pity, because writing a sermon is very much like playing that game. You take the text. You think, why is it? what is it? and so on. You put that down under "Generally." Then you proceed to the First, Secondly, and Thirdly. Papa won't have Fourthlys – says they are all my eye. Then you have a final Collectively, several pages of this being put in great black brackets, writing opposite, "LEAVE THIS OUT IF THE FARMERS ARE FALLING ASLEEP." Then comes your In Conclusion, then A Few Words And I Have Done. Well, all this time you have put on the back of each page, "KEEP YOUR VOICE DOWN" – I mean,' she added, correcting herself, 'that's how I do in papa's sermon-book, because otherwise he gets louder and louder, till at last he shouts like a farmer up a-field. Oh, papa is so funny in some things!'

Then, after this childish burst of confidence, she was frightened, as if warned by womanly instinct, which for the moment her ardour had outrun, that she had been too forward to a comparative stranger.

Elfride saw her father then, and went away into the wind, being caught by a gust as she ascended the churchyard slope, in which gust she had the motions, without the motives, of a hoiden; the grace, without the self-consciousness, of a pirouetter. She conversed for a minute or two with her father, and proceeded homeward, Mr. Swancourt coming on to the church to Stephen. The wind had freshened his warm complexion as it freshens the glow of a brand. He was in a mood of jollity, and watched Elfride down the hill with a smile.

'You little flyaway! you look wild enough now,' he said, and turned to Stephen. 'But she's not a wild child at all, Mr. Smith. As steady as you; and that you are steady I see from your diligence here.'

'I think Miss Swancourt very clever,' Stephen observed.

'Yes, she is; certainly, she is,' said papa, turning his voice as much as possible to the neutral tone of disinterested criticism. 'Now, Smith, I'll tell you something; but she mustn't know it for the world – not for the world, mind, for she insists upon keeping it a dead secret. Why, SHE WRITES MY SERMONS FOR ME OFTEN, and a very good job she makes of them!'

'She can do anything.'

'She can do that. The little rascal has the very trick of the trade. But, mind you, Smith, not a word about it to her, not a single word!'

'Not a word,' said Smith.

'Look there,' said Mr. Swancourt. 'What do you think of my roofing?' He pointed with his walking-stick at the chancel roof,

'Did you do that, sir?'

'Yes, I worked in shirt-sleeves all the time that was going on. I pulled down the old rafters, fixed the new ones, put on the battens, slated the roof, all with my own hands, Worm being my assistant. We worked like slaves, didn't we, Worm?'

'Ay, sure, we did; harder than some here and there – hee, hee!' said William Worm, cropping up from somewhere. 'Like slaves, 'a b'lieve – hee, hee! And weren't ye foaming mad, sir, when the nails wouldn't go straight? Mighty I! There, 'tisn't so bad to cuss and keep it in as to cuss and let it out, is it, sir?'

'Well – why?'

'Because you, sir, when ye were a-putting on the roof, only used to cuss in your mind, which is, I suppose, no harm at all.'

'I don't think you know what goes on in my mind, Worm.'

'Oh, doan't I, sir – hee, hee! Maybe I'm but a poor wambling thing, sir, and can't read much; but I can spell as well as some here and there. Doan't ye mind, sir, that blustrous night when ye asked me to hold the candle to ye in yer workshop, when you were making a new chair for the chancel?'

'Yes; what of that?'

'I stood with the candle, and you said you liked company, if 'twas only a dog or cat – maning me; and the chair wouldn't do nohow.'

'Ah, I remember.'

'No; the chair wouldn't do nohow. 'A was very well to look at; but, Lord! – '

'Worm, how often have I corrected you for irreverent speaking?'

' – 'A was very well to look at, but you couldn't sit in the chair nohow. 'Twas all a-twist wi' the chair, like the letter Z, directly you sat down upon the chair. "Get up, Worm," says you, when you seed the chair go all a-sway wi' me. Up you took the chair, and flung en like fire and brimstone to t'other end of your shop – all in a passion. "Damn the chair!" says I. "Just what I was thinking," says you, sir. "I could see it in your face, sir," says I, "and I hope you and God will forgi'e me for saying what you wouldn't." To save your life you couldn't help laughing, sir, at a poor wambler reading your thoughts so plain. Ay, I'm as wise as one here and there.'

'I thought you had better have a practical man to go over the church and tower with you,' Mr. Swancourt said to Stephen the following morning, 'so I got Lord Luxellian's permission to send for a man when you came. I told him to be there at ten o'clock. He's a very intelligent man, and he will tell you all you want to know about the state of the walls. His name is John Smith.'

Elfride did not like to be seen again at the church with Stephen. 'I will watch here for your appearance at the top of the tower,' she said laughingly. 'I shall see your figure against the sky.'

'And when I am up there I'll wave my handkerchief to you, Miss Swancourt,' said Stephen. 'In twelve minutes from this present moment,' he added, looking at his watch, 'I'll be at the summit and look out for you.'

She went round to the corner of the shrubbery, whence she could watch him down the slope leading to the foot of the hill on which the church stood. There she saw waiting for him a white spot – a mason in his working clothes. Stephen met this man and stopped.

To her surprise, instead of their moving on to the churchyard, they both leisurely sat down upon a stone close by their meeting-place, and remained as if in deep conversation. Elfride looked at the time; nine of the twelve minutes had passed, and Stephen showed no signs of moving. More minutes passed – she grew cold with waiting, and shivered. It was not till the end of a quarter of an hour that they began to slowly wend up the hill at a snail's pace.

'Rude and unmannerly!' she said to herself, colouring with pique. 'Anybody would think he was in love with that horrid mason instead of with – '

The sentence remained unspoken, though not unthought.

She returned to the porch.

'Is the man you sent for a lazy, sit-still, do-nothing kind of man?' she inquired of her father.

'No,' he said surprised; 'quite the reverse. He is Lord Luxellian's master-mason, John Smith.'

'Oh,' said Elfride indifferently, and returned towards her bleak station, and waited and shivered again. It was a trifle, after all – a childish thing – looking out from a tower and waving a handkerchief. But her new friend had promised, and why should he tease her so? The effect of a blow is as proportionate to the texture of the object struck as to its own momentum; and she had such a superlative capacity for being wounded that little hits struck her hard.

It was not till the end of half an hour that two figures were seen above the parapet of the dreary old pile, motionless as bitterns on a ruined mosque. Even then Stephen was not true enough to perform what he was so courteous to promise, and he vanished without making a sign.

He returned at midday. Elfride looked vexed when unconscious that his eyes were upon her; when conscious, severe. However, her attitude of coldness had long outlived the coldness itself, and she could no longer utter feigned words of indifference.

'Ah, you weren't kind to keep me waiting in the cold, and break your promise,' she said at last reproachfully, in tones too low for her father's powers of hearing.

'Forgive, forgive me!' said Stephen with dismay. 'I had forgotten – quite forgotten! Something prevented my remembering.'

'Any further explanation?' said Miss Capricious, pouting.

He was silent for a few minutes, and looked askance.

'None,' he said, with the accent of one who concealed a sin.

Chapter V

‘Bosom’d high in tufted trees.’

It was breakfast time.

As seen from the vicarage dining-room, which took a warm tone of light from the fire, the weather and scene outside seemed to have stereotyped themselves in unrelieved shades of gray. The long-armed trees and shrubs of juniper, cedar, and pine varieties, were grayish black; those of the broad-leaved sort, together with the herbage, were grayish-green; the eternal hills and tower behind them were grayish-brown; the sky, dropping behind all, gray of the purest melancholy.

Yet in spite of this sombre artistic effect, the morning was not one which tended to lower the spirits. It was even cheering. For it did not rain, nor was rain likely to fall for many days to come.

Elfride had turned from the table towards the fire and was idly elevating a hand-screen before her face, when she heard the click of a little gate outside.

‘Ah, here’s the postman!’ she said, as a shuffling, active man came through an opening in the shrubbery and across the lawn. She vanished, and met him in the porch, afterwards coming in with her hands behind her back.

‘How many are there? Three for papa, one for Mr. Smith, none for Miss Swancourt. And, papa, look here, one of yours is from – whom do you think? – Lord Luxellian. And it has something HARD in it – a lump of something. I’ve been feeling it through the envelope, and can’t think what it is.’

‘What does Luxellian write for, I wonder?’ Mr. Swancourt had said simultaneously with her words. He handed Stephen his letter, and took his own, putting on his countenance a higher class of look than was customary, as became a poor gentleman who was going to read a letter from a peer.

Stephen read his missive with a countenance quite the reverse of the vicar’s.

‘PERCY PLACE, Thursday Evening.

> ‘DEAR SMITH, – Old H. is in a towering rage with you for being so long about the church sketches. Swears you are more trouble than you are worth. He says I am to write and say you are to stay no longer on any consideration – that he would have done it all in three hours very easily. I told him that you were not like an experienced hand, which he seemed to forget, but it did not make much difference. However, between you and me privately, if I were you I would not alarm myself for a day or so, if I were not inclined to return. I would make out the week and finish my spree. He will blow up just as much if you appear here on Saturday as if you keep away till Monday morning. – Yours very truly,

‘SIMPKINS JENKINS.

‘Dear me – very awkward!’ said Stephen, rather en l’air, and confused with the kind of confusion that assails an understrapper when he has been enlarged by accident to the dimensions of a superior, and is somewhat rudely pared down to his original size.

‘What is awkward?’ said Miss Swancourt.

Smith by this time recovered his equanimity, and with it the professional dignity of an experienced architect.

‘Important business demands my immediate presence in London, I regret to say,’ he replied.

‘What! Must you go at once?’ said Mr. Swancourt, looking over the edge of his letter. ‘Important business? A young fellow like you to have important business!’

‘The truth is,’ said Stephen blushing, and rather ashamed of having pretended even so slightly to a consequence which did not belong to him, – ‘the truth is, Mr. Hewby has sent to say I am to come home; and I must obey him.’

'I see; I see. It is politic to do so, you mean. Now I can see more than you think. You are to be his partner. I booked you for that directly I read his letter to me the other day, and the way he spoke of you. He thinks a great deal of you, Mr. Smith, or he wouldn't be so anxious for your return.'

Unpleasant to Stephen such remarks as these could not sound; to have the expectancy of partnership with one of the largest-practising architects in London thrust upon him was cheering, however untenable he felt the idea to be. He saw that, whatever Mr. Hewby might think, Mr. Swancourt certainly thought much of him to entertain such an idea on such slender ground as to be absolutely no ground at all. And then, unaccountably, his speaking face exhibited a cloud of sadness, which a reflection on the remoteness of any such contingency could hardly have sufficed to cause.

Elfride was struck with that look of his; even Mr. Swancourt noticed it.

'Well,' he said cheerfully, 'never mind that now. You must come again on your own account; not on business. Come to see me as a visitor, you know – say, in your holidays – all you town men have holidays like schoolboys. When are they?'

'In August, I believe.'

'Very well; come in August; and then you need not hurry away so. I am glad to get somebody decent to talk to, or at, in this outlandish ultima Thule. But, by the bye, I have something to say – you won't go to-day?'

'No; I need not,' said Stephen hesitatingly. 'I am not obliged to get back before Monday morning.'

'Very well, then, that brings me to what I am going to propose. This is a letter from Lord Luxellian. I think you heard me speak of him as the resident landowner in this district, and patron of this living?'

'I – know of him.'

'He is in London now. It seems that he has run up on business for a day or two, and taken Lady Luxellian with him. He has written to ask me to go to his house, and search for a paper among his private memoranda, which he forgot to take with him.'

'What did he send in the letter?' inquired Elfride.

'The key of a private desk in which the papers are. He doesn't like to trust such a matter to any body else. I have done such things for him before. And what I propose is, that we make an afternoon of it – all three of us. Go for a drive to Targan Bay, come home by way of Endelstow House; and whilst I am looking over the documents you can ramble about the rooms where you like. I have the run of the house at any time, you know. The building, though nothing but a mass of gables outside, has a splendid hall, staircase, and gallery within; and there are a few good pictures.'

'Yes, there are,' said Stephen.

'Have you seen the place, then?

'I saw it as I came by,' he said hastily.

'Oh yes; but I was alluding to the interior. And the church – St. Eval's – is much older than our St. Agnes' here. I do duty in that and this alternately, you know. The fact is, I ought to have some help; riding across that park for two miles on a wet morning is not at all the thing. If my constitution were not well seasoned, as thank God it is,' – here Mr. Swancourt looked down his front, as if his constitution were visible there, – 'I should be coughing and barking all the year round. And when the family goes away, there are only about three servants to preach to when I get there. Well, that shall be the arrangement, then. Elfride, you will like to go?'

Elfride assented; and the little breakfast-party separated. Stephen rose to go and take a few final measurements at the church, the vicar following him to the door with a mysterious expression of inquiry on his face.

'You'll put up with our not having family prayer this morning, I hope?' he whispered.

'Yes; quite so,' said Stephen.

'To tell you the truth,' he continued in the same undertone, 'we don't make a regular thing of it; but when we have strangers visiting us, I am strongly of opinion that it is the proper thing to do, and I always do it. I am very strict on that point. But you, Smith, there is something in your face which makes me feel quite at home; no nonsense about you, in short. Ah, it reminds me of a splendid story I used to hear when I was a helter-skelter young fellow – such a story! But' – here the vicar shook his head self-forbiddingly, and grimly laughed.

'Was it a good story?' said young Smith, smiling too.

'Oh yes; but 'tis too bad – too bad! Couldn't tell it to you for the world!'

Stephen went across the lawn, hearing the vicar chuckling privately at the recollection as he withdrew.

They started at three o'clock. The gray morning had resolved itself into an afternoon bright with a pale pervasive sunlight, without the sun itself being visible. Lightly they trotted along – the wheels nearly silent, the horse's hoofs clapping, almost ringing, upon the hard, white, turnpike road as it followed the level ridge in a perfectly straight line, seeming to be absorbed ultimately by the white of the sky.

Targan Bay – which had the merit of being easily got at – was duly visited. They then swept round by innumerable lanes, in which not twenty consecutive yards were either straight or level, to the domain of Lord Luxellian. A woman with a double chin and thick neck, like Queen Anne by Dahl, threw open the lodge gate, a little boy standing behind her.

'I'll give him something, poor little fellow,' said Elfride, pulling out her purse and hastily opening it. From the interior of her purse a host of bits of paper, like a flock of white birds, floated into the air, and were blown about in all directions.

'Well, to be sure!' said Stephen with a slight laugh.

'What the dickens is all that?' said Mr. Swancourt. 'Not halves of bank-notes, Elfride?'

Elfride looked annoyed and guilty. 'They are only something of mine, papa,' she faltered, whilst Stephen leapt out, and, assisted by the lodge-keeper's little boy, crept about round the wheels and horse's hoofs till the papers were all gathered together again. He handed them back to her, and remounted.

'I suppose you are wondering what those scraps were?' she said, as they bowled along up the sycamore avenue. 'And so I may as well tell you. They are notes for a romance I am writing.'

She could not help colouring at the confession, much as she tried to avoid it.

'A story, do you mean?' said Stephen, Mr. Swancourt half listening, and catching a word of the conversation now and then.

'Yes; THE COURT OF KELLYON CASTLE; a romance of the fifteenth century. Such writing is out of date now, I know; but I like doing it.'

'A romance carried in a purse! If a highwayman were to rob you, he would be taken in.'

'Yes; that's my way of carrying manuscript. The real reason is, that I mostly write bits of it on scraps of paper when I am on horseback; and I put them there for convenience.'

'What are you going to do with your romance when you have written it?' said Stephen.

'I don't know,' she replied, and turned her head to look at the prospect.

For by this time they had reached the precincts of Endelstow House. Driving through an ancient gate-way of dun-coloured stone, spanned by the high-shouldered Tudor arch, they found themselves in a spacious court, closed by a facade on each of its three sides. The substantial portions of the existing building dated from the reign of Henry VIII.; but the picturesque and sheltered spot had been the site of an erection of a much earlier date. A licence to crenellate mansum infra manerium suum was granted by Edward II. to 'Hugo Luxellen chivaler;' but though the faint outline of the ditch and mound was visible at points, no sign of the original building remained.

The windows on all sides were long and many-mullioned; the roof lines broken up by dormer lights of the same pattern. The apex stones of these dormers, together with those of the gables, were

surmounted by grotesque figures in rampant, passant, and couchant variety. Tall octagonal and twisted chimneys thrust themselves high up into the sky, surpassed in height, however, by some poplars and sycamores at the back, which showed their gently rocking summits over ridge and parapet. In the corners of the court polygonal bays, whose surfaces were entirely occupied by buttresses and windows, broke into the squareness of the enclosure; and a far-projecting oriel, springing from a fantastic series of mouldings, overhung the archway of the chief entrance to the house.

As Mr. Swancourt had remarked, he had the freedom of the mansion in the absence of its owner. Upon a statement of his errand they were all admitted to the library, and left entirely to themselves. Mr. Swancourt was soon up to his eyes in the examination of a heap of papers he had taken from the cabinet described by his correspondent. Stephen and Elfride had nothing to do but to wander about till her father was ready.

Elfride entered the gallery, and Stephen followed her without seeming to do so. It was a long sombre apartment, enriched with fittings a century or so later in style than the walls of the mansion. Pilasters of Renaissance workmanship supported a cornice from which sprang a curved ceiling, panelled in the awkward twists and curls of the period. The old Gothic quarries still remained in the upper portion of the large window at the end, though they had made way for a more modern form of glazing elsewhere.

Stephen was at one end of the gallery looking towards Elfride, who stood in the midst, beginning to feel somewhat depressed by the society of Luxellian shades of cadaverous complexion fixed by Holbein, Kneller, and Lely, and seeming to gaze at and through her in a moralizing mood. The silence, which cast almost a spell upon them, was broken by the sudden opening of a door at the far end.

Out bounded a pair of little girls, lightly yet warmly dressed. Their eyes were sparkling; their hair swinging about and around; their red mouths laughing with unalloyed gladness.

'Ah, Miss Swancourt: dearest Elfie! we heard you. Are you going to stay here? You are our little mamma, are you not – our big mamma is gone to London,' said one.

'Let me tiss you,' said the other, in appearance very much like the first, but to a smaller pattern.

Their pink cheeks and yellow hair were speedily intermingled with the folds of Elfride's dress; she then stooped and tenderly embraced them both.

'Such an odd thing,' said Elfride, smiling, and turning to Stephen. 'They have taken it into their heads lately to call me "little mamma," because I am very fond of them, and wore a dress the other day something like one of Lady Luxellian's.'

These two young creatures were the Honourable Mary and the Honourable Kate – scarcely appearing large enough as yet to bear the weight of such ponderous prefixes. They were the only two children of Lord and Lady Luxellian, and, as it proved, had been left at home during their parents' temporary absence, in the custody of nurse and governess. Lord Luxellian was dotingly fond of the children; rather indifferent towards his wife, since she had begun to show an inclination not to please him by giving him a boy.

All children instinctively ran after Elfride, looking upon her more as an unusually nice large specimen of their own tribe than as a grown-up elder. It had now become an established rule, that whenever she met them – indoors or out-of-doors, weekdays or Sundays – they were to be severally pressed against her face and bosom for the space of a quarter of a minute, and other-wise made much of on the delightful system of cumulative epithet and caress to which unpractised girls will occasionally abandon themselves.

A look of misgiving by the youngsters towards the door by which they had entered directed attention to a maid-servant appearing from the same quarter, to put an end to this sweet freedom of the poor Honourables Mary and Kate.

'I wish you lived here, Miss Swancourt,' piped one like a melancholy bullfinch.

‘So do I,’ piped the other like a rather more melancholy bullfinch. ‘Mamma can’t play with us so nicely as you do. I don’t think she ever learnt playing when she was little. When shall we come to see you?’

‘As soon as you like, dears.’

‘And sleep at your house all night? That’s what I mean by coming to see you. I don’t care to see people with hats and bonnets on, and all standing up and walking about.’

‘As soon as we can get mamma’s permission you shall come and stay as long as ever you like. Good-bye!’

The prisoners were then led off, Elfride again turning her attention to her guest, whom she had left standing at the remote end of the gallery. On looking around for him he was nowhere to be seen. Elfride stepped down to the library, thinking he might have rejoined her father there. But Mr. Swancourt, now cheerfully illuminated by a pair of candles, was still alone, untying packets of letters and papers, and tying them up again.

As Elfride did not stand on a sufficiently intimate footing with the object of her interest to justify her, as a proper young lady, to commence the active search for him that youthful impulsiveness prompted, and as, nevertheless, for a nascent reason connected with those divinely cut lips of his, she did not like him to be absent from her side, she wandered desultorily back to the oak staircase, pouting and casting her eyes about in hope of discerning his boyish figure.

Though daylight still prevailed in the rooms, the corridors were in a depth of shadow – chill, sad, and silent; and it was only by looking along them towards light spaces beyond that anything or anybody could be discerned therein. One of these light spots she found to be caused by a side-door with glass panels in the upper part. Elfride opened it, and found herself confronting a secondary or inner lawn, separated from the principal lawn front by a shrubbery.

And now she saw a perplexing sight. At right angles to the face of the wing she had emerged from, and within a few feet of the door, jutted out another wing of the mansion, lower and with less architectural character. Immediately opposite to her, in the wall of this wing, was a large broad window, having its blind drawn down, and illuminated by a light in the room it screened.

On the blind was a shadow from somebody close inside it – a person in profile. The profile was unmistakably that of Stephen. It was just possible to see that his arms were uplifted, and that his hands held an article of some kind. Then another shadow appeared – also in profile – and came close to him. This was the shadow of a woman. She turned her back towards Stephen: he lifted and held out what now proved to be a shawl or mantle – placed it carefully – so carefully – round the lady; disappeared; reappeared in her front – fastened the mantle. Did he then kiss her? Surely not. Yet the motion might have been a kiss. Then both shadows swelled to colossal dimensions – grew distorted – vanished.

Two minutes elapsed.

‘Ah, Miss Swancourt! I am so glad to find you. I was looking for you,’ said a voice at her elbow – Stephen’s voice. She stepped into the passage.

‘Do you know any of the members of this establishment?’ said she.

‘Not a single one: how should I?’ he replied.

Chapter VI

'Fare thee weel awhile!'

Simultaneously with the conclusion of Stephen's remark, the sound of the closing of an external door in their immediate neighbourhood reached Elfride's ears. It came from the further side of the wing containing the illuminated room. She then discerned, by the aid of the dusky departing light, a figure, whose sex was undistinguishable, walking down the gravelled path by the parterre towards the river. The figure grew fainter, and vanished under the trees.

Mr. Swancourt's voice was heard calling out their names from a distant corridor in the body of the building. They retraced their steps, and found him with his coat buttoned up and his hat on, awaiting their advent in a mood of self-satisfaction at having brought his search to a successful close. The carriage was brought round, and without further delay the trio drove away from the mansion, under the echoing gateway arch, and along by the leafless sycamores, as the stars began to kindle their trembling lights behind the maze of branches and twigs.

No words were spoken either by youth or maiden. Her unpractised mind was completely occupied in fathoming its recent acquisition. The young man who had inspired her with such novelty of feeling, who had come directly from London on business to her father, having been brought by chance to Endelstow House had, by some means or other, acquired the privilege of approaching some lady he had found therein, and of honouring her by petits soins of a marked kind, – all in the space of half an hour.

What room were they standing in? thought Elfride. As nearly as she could guess, it was Lord Luxellian's business-room, or office. What people were in the house? None but the governess and servants, as far as she knew, and of these he had professed a total ignorance. Had the person she had indistinctly seen leaving the house anything to do with the performance? It was impossible to say without appealing to the culprit himself, and that she would never do. The more Elfride reflected, the more certain did it appear that the meeting was a chance rencounter, and not an appointment. On the ultimate inquiry as to the individuality of the woman, Elfride at once assumed that she could not be an inferior. Stephen Smith was not the man to care about passages-at-love with women beneath him. Though gentle, ambition was visible in his kindling eyes; he evidently hoped for much; hoped indefinitely, but extensively. Elfride was puzzled, and being puzzled, was, by a natural sequence of girlish sensations, vexed with him. No more pleasure came in recognizing that from liking to attract him she was getting on to love him, boyish as he was and innocent as he had seemed.

They reached the bridge which formed a link between the eastern and western halves of the parish. Situated in a valley that was bounded outwardly by the sea, it formed a point of depression from which the road ascended with great steepness to West Endelstow and the Vicarage. There was no absolute necessity for either of them to alight, but as it was the vicar's custom after a long journey to humour the horse in making this winding ascent, Elfride, moved by an imitative instinct, suddenly jumped out when Pleasant had just begun to adopt the deliberate stalk he associated with this portion of the road.

The young man seemed glad of any excuse for breaking the silence. 'Why, Miss Swancourt, what a risky thing to do!' he exclaimed, immediately following her example by jumping down on the other side.

'Oh no, not at all,' replied she coldly; the shadow phenomenon at Endelstow House still paramount within her.

Stephen walked along by himself for two or three minutes, wrapped in the rigid reserve dictated by her tone. Then apparently thinking that it was only for girls to pout, he came serenely round to

her side, and offered his arm with Castilian gallantry, to assist her in ascending the remaining three-quarters of the steep.

Here was a temptation: it was the first time in her life that Elfride had been treated as a grown-up woman in this way – offered an arm in a manner implying that she had a right to refuse it. Till to-night she had never received masculine attentions beyond those which might be contained in such homely remarks as 'Elfride, give me your hand;' 'Elfride, take hold of my arm,' from her father. Her callow heart made an epoch of the incident; she considered her array of feelings, for and against. Collectively they were for taking this offered arm; the single one of pique determined her to punish Stephen by refusing.

'No, thank you, Mr. Smith; I can get along better by myself'

It was Elfride's first fragile attempt at browbeating a lover. Fearing more the issue of such an undertaking than what a gentle young man might think of her waywardness, she immediately afterwards determined to please herself by reversing her statement.

'On second thoughts, I will take it,' she said.

They slowly went their way up the hill, a few yards behind the carriage.

'How silent you are, Miss Swancourt!' Stephen observed.

'Perhaps I think you silent too,' she returned.

'I may have reason to be.'

'Scarcely; it is sadness that makes people silent, and you can have none.'

'You don't know: I have a trouble; though some might think it less a trouble than a dilemma.'

'What is it?' she asked impulsively.

Stephen hesitated. 'I might tell,' he said; 'at the same time, perhaps, it is as well – '

She let go his arm and imperatively pushed it from her, tossing her head. She had just learnt that a good deal of dignity is lost by asking a question to which an answer is refused, even ever so politely; for though politeness does good service in cases of requisition and compromise, it but little helps a direct refusal. 'I don't wish to know anything of it; I don't wish it,' she went on. 'The carriage is waiting for us at the top of the hill; we must get in;' and Elfride flitted to the front. 'Papa, here is your Elfride!' she exclaimed to the dusky figure of the old gentleman, as she sprang up and sank by his side without deigning to accept aid from Stephen.

'Ah, yes!' uttered the vicar in artificially alert tones, awaking from a most profound sleep, and suddenly preparing to alight.

'Why, what are you doing, papa? We are not home yet.'

'Oh no, no; of course not; we are not at home yet,' Mr. Swancourt said very hastily, endeavouring to dodge back to his original position with the air of a man who had not moved at all. 'The fact is I was so lost in deep meditation that I forgot whereabouts we were.' And in a minute the vicar was snoring again.

That evening, being the last, seemed to throw an exceptional shade of sadness over Stephen Smith, and the repeated injunctions of the vicar, that he was to come and revisit them in the summer, apparently tended less to raise his spirits than to unearth some misgiving.

He left them in the gray light of dawn, whilst the colours of earth were sombre, and the sun was yet hidden in the east. Elfride had fidgeted all night in her little bed lest none of the household should be awake soon enough to start him, and also lest she might miss seeing again the bright eyes and curly hair, to which their owner's possession of a hidden mystery added a deeper tinge of romance. To some extent – so soon does womanly interest take a solicitous turn – she felt herself responsible for his safe conduct. They breakfasted before daylight; Mr. Swancourt, being more and more taken with his guest's ingenuous appearance, having determined to rise early and bid him a friendly farewell. It was, however, rather to the vicar's astonishment, that he saw Elfride walk in to the breakfast-table, candle in hand.

Whilst William Worm performed his toilet (during which performance the inmates of the vicarage were always in the habit of waiting with exemplary patience), Elfride wandered desultorily to the summer house. Stephen followed her thither. The copse-covered valley was visible from this position, a mist now lying all along its length, hiding the stream which trickled through it, though the observers themselves were in clear air.

They stood close together, leaning over the rustic balustrading which bounded the arbour on the outward side, and formed the crest of a steep slope beneath Elfride constrainedly pointed out some features of the distant uplands rising irregularly opposite. But the artistic eye was, either from nature or circumstance, very faint in Stephen now, and he only half attended to her description, as if he spared time from some other thought going on within him.

'Well, good-bye,' he said suddenly; 'I must never see you again, I suppose, Miss Swancourt, in spite of invitations.'

His genuine tribulation played directly upon the delicate chords of her nature. She could afford to forgive him for a concealment or two. Moreover, the shyness which would not allow him to look her in the face lent bravery to her own eyes and tongue.

'Oh, DO come again, Mr. Smith!' she said prettily.

'I should delight in it; but it will be better if I do not.'

'Why?'

'Certain circumstances in connection with me make it undesirable. Not on my account; on yours.'

'Goodness! As if anything in connection with you could hurt me,' she said with serene supremacy; but seeing that this plan of treatment was inappropriate, she tuned a smaller note. 'Ah, I know why you will not come. You don't want to. You'll go home to London and to all the stirring people there, and will never want to see us any more!'

'You know I have no such reason.'

'And go on writing letters to the lady you are engaged to, just as before.'

'What does that mean? I am not engaged.'

'You wrote a letter to a Miss Somebody; I saw it in the letter-rack.'

'Pooh! an elderly woman who keeps a stationer's shop; and it was to tell her to keep my newspapers till I get back.'

'You needn't have explained: it was not my business at all.' Miss Elfride was rather relieved to hear that statement, nevertheless. 'And you won't come again to see my father?' she insisted.

'I should like to – and to see you again, but – '

'Will you reveal to me that matter you hide?' she interrupted petulantly.

'No; not now.'

She could not but go on, graceless as it might seem.

'Tell me this,' she importuned with a trembling mouth. 'Does any meeting of yours with a lady at Endelstow Vicarage clash with – any interest you may take in me?'

He started a little. 'It does not,' he said emphatically; and looked into the pupils of her eyes with the confidence that only honesty can give, and even that to youth alone.

The explanation had not come, but a gloom left her. She could not but believe that utterance. Whatever enigma might lie in the shadow on the blind, it was not an enigma of underhand passion.

She turned towards the house, entering it through the conservatory. Stephen went round to the front door. Mr. Swancourt was standing on the step in his slippers. Worm was adjusting a buckle in the harness, and murmuring about his poor head; and everything was ready for Stephen's departure.

'You named August for your visit. August it shall be; that is, if you care for the society of such a fossilized Tory,' said Mr. Swancourt.

Mr. Smith only responded hesitatingly, that he should like to come again.

'You said you would, and you must,' insisted Elfride, coming to the door and speaking under her father's arm.

Whatever reason the youth may have had for not wishing to enter the house as a guest, it no longer predominated. He promised, and bade them adieu, and got into the pony-carriage, which crept up the slope, and bore him out of their sight.

'I never was so much taken with anybody in my life as I am with that young fellow – never! I cannot understand it – can't understand it anyhow,' said Mr. Swancourt quite energetically to himself; and went indoors.

Chapter VII

'No more of me you knew, my love!'

Stephen Smith revisited Endelstow Vicarage, agreeably to his promise. He had a genuine artistic reason for coming, though no such reason seemed to be required. Six-and-thirty old seat ends, of exquisite fifteenth-century workmanship, were rapidly decaying in an aisle of the church; and it became politic to make drawings of their worm-eaten contours ere they were battered past recognition in the turmoil of the so-called restoration.

He entered the house at sunset, and the world was pleasant again to the two fair-haired ones. A momentary pang of disappointment had, nevertheless, passed through Elfride when she casually discovered that he had not come that minute post-haste from London, but had reached the neighbourhood the previous evening. Surprise would have accompanied the feeling, had she not remembered that several tourists were haunting the coast at this season, and that Stephen might have chosen to do likewise.

They did little besides chat that evening, Mr. Swancourt beginning to question his visitor, closely yet paternally, and in good part, on his hopes and prospects from the profession he had embraced. Stephen gave vague answers. The next day it rained. In the evening, when twenty-four hours of Elfride had completely rekindled her admirer's ardour, a game of chess was proposed between them.

The game had its value in helping on the developments of their future.

Elfride soon perceived that her opponent was but a learner. She next noticed that he had a very odd way of handling the pieces when castling or taking a man. Antecedently she would have supposed that the same performance must be gone through by all players in the same manner; she was taught by his differing action that all ordinary players, who learn the game by sight, unconsciously touch the men in a stereotyped way. This impression of indescribable oddness in Stephen's touch culminated in speech when she saw him, at the taking of one of her bishops, push it aside with the taking man instead of lifting it as a preliminary to the move.

'How strangely you handle the men, Mr. Smith!'

'Do I? I am sorry for that.'

'Oh no – don't be sorry; it is not a matter great enough for sorrow. But who taught you to play?'

'Nobody, Miss Swancourt,' he said. 'I learnt from a book lent me by my friend Mr. Knight, the noblest man in the world.'

'But you have seen people play?'

'I have never seen the playing of a single game. This is the first time I ever had the opportunity of playing with a living opponent. I have worked out many games from books, and studied the reasons of the different moves, but that is all.'

This was a full explanation of his mannerism; but the fact that a man with the desire for chess should have grown up without being able to see or engage in a game astonished her not a little. She pondered on the circumstance for some time, looking into vacancy and hindering the play.

Mr. Swancourt was sitting with his eyes fixed on the board, but apparently thinking of other things. Half to himself he said, pending the move of Elfride:

'"Quae finis aut quod me manet stipendium?"'

Stephen replied instantly:

'"Effare: jussas cum fide poenas luam."'

'Excellent – prompt – gratifying!' said Mr. Swancourt with feeling, bringing down his hand upon the table, and making three pawns and a knight dance over their borders by the shaking. 'I was musing on those words as applicable to a strange course I am steering – but enough of that. I

am delighted with you, Mr. Smith, for it is so seldom in this desert that I meet with a man who is gentleman and scholar enough to continue a quotation, however trite it may be.'

'I also apply the words to myself,' said Stephen quietly.

'You? The last man in the world to do that, I should have thought.'

'Come,' murmured Elfride poutingly, and insinuating herself between them, 'tell me all about it. Come, construe, construe!'

Stephen looked steadfastly into her face, and said slowly, and in a voice full of a far-off meaning that seemed quaintly premature in one so young:

'Quae finis WHAT WILL BE THE END, aut OR, quod stipendium WHAT FINE, manet me AWAITS ME? Effare SPEAK OUT; luam I WILL PAY, cum fide WITH FAITH, jussas poenas THE PENALTY REQUIRED.'

The vicar, who had listened with a critical compression of the lips to this school-boy recitation, and by reason of his imperfect hearing had missed the marked realism of Stephen's tone in the English words, now said hesitatingly: 'By the bye, Mr. Smith (I know you'll excuse my curiosity), though your translation was unexceptionably correct and close, you have a way of pronouncing your Latin which to me seems most peculiar. Not that the pronunciation of a dead language is of much importance; yet your accents and quantities have a grotesque sound to my ears. I thought first that you had acquired your way of breathing the vowels from some of the northern colleges; but it cannot be so with the quantities. What I was going to ask was, if your instructor in the classics could possibly have been an Oxford or Cambridge man?'

'Yes; he was an Oxford man – Fellow of St. Cyprian's.'

'Really?'

'Oh yes; there's no doubt about it.

'The oddest thing ever I heard of!' said Mr. Swancourt, starting with astonishment. 'That the pupil of such a man – '

'The best and cleverest man in England!' cried Stephen enthusiastically.

'That the pupil of such a man should pronounce Latin in the way you pronounce it beats all I ever heard. How long did he instruct you?'

'Four years.'

'Four years!'

'It is not so strange when I explain,' Stephen hastened to say. 'It was done in this way – by letter. I sent him exercises and construing twice a week, and twice a week he sent them back to me corrected, with marginal notes of instruction. That is how I learnt my Latin and Greek, such as it is. He is not responsible for my scanning. He has never heard me scan a line.'

'A novel case, and a singular instance of patience!' cried the vicar.

'On his part, not on mine. Ah, Henry Knight is one in a thousand! I remember his speaking to me on this very subject of pronunciation. He says that, much to his regret, he sees a time coming when every man will pronounce even the common words of his own tongue as seems right in his own ears, and be thought none the worse for it; that the speaking age is passing away, to make room for the writing age.'

Both Elfride and her father had waited attentively to hear Stephen go on to what would have been the most interesting part of the story, namely, what circumstances could have necessitated such an unusual method of education. But no further explanation was volunteered; and they saw, by the young man's manner of concentrating himself upon the chess-board, that he was anxious to drop the subject.

The game proceeded. Elfride played by rote; Stephen by thought. It was the cruellest thing to checkmate him after so much labour, she considered. What was she dishonest enough to do in her compassion? To let him checkmate her. A second game followed; and being herself absolutely indifferent as to the result (her playing was above the average among women, and she knew it), she

allowed him to give checkmate again. A final game, in which she adopted the Muzio gambit as her opening, was terminated by Elfride's victory at the twelfth move.

Stephen looked up suspiciously. His heart was throbbing even more excitedly than was hers, which itself had quickened when she seriously set to work on this last occasion. Mr. Swancourt had left the room.

'You have been trifling with me till now!' he exclaimed, his face flushing. 'You did not play your best in the first two games?'

Elfride's guilt showed in her face. Stephen became the picture of vexation and sadness, which, relishable for a moment, caused her the next instant to regret the mistake she had made.

'Mr. Smith, forgive me!' she said sweetly. 'I see now, though I did not at first, that what I have done seems like contempt for your skill. But, indeed, I did not mean it in that sense. I could not, upon my conscience, win a victory in those first and second games over one who fought at such a disadvantage and so manfully.'

He drew a long breath, and murmured bitterly, 'Ah, you are cleverer than I. You can do everything – I can do nothing! O Miss Swancourt!' he burst out wildly, his heart swelling in his throat, 'I must tell you how I love you! All these months of my absence I have worshipped you.'

He leapt from his seat like the impulsive lad that he was, slid round to her side, and almost before she suspected it his arm was round her waist, and the two sets of curls intermingled.

So entirely new was full-blown love to Elfride, that she trembled as much from the novelty of the emotion as from the emotion itself. Then she suddenly withdrew herself and stood upright, vexed that she had submitted unresistingly even to his momentary pressure. She resolved to consider this demonstration as premature.

'You must not begin such things as those,' she said with coquettish hauteur of a very transparent nature 'And – you must not do so again – and papa is coming.'

'Let me kiss you – only a little one,' he said with his usual delicacy, and without reading the factitiousness of her manner.

'No; not one.'

'Only on your cheek?'

'No.'

'Forehead?'

'Certainly not.'

'You care for somebody else, then? Ah, I thought so!'

'I am sure I do not.'

'Nor for me either?'

'How can I tell?' she said simply, the simplicity lying merely in the broad outlines of her manner and speech. There were the semitone of voice and half-hidden expression of eyes which tell the initiated how very fragile is the ice of reserve at these times.

Footsteps were heard. Mr. Swancourt then entered the room, and their private colloquy ended.

The day after this partial revelation, Mr. Swancourt proposed a drive to the cliffs beyond Targan Bay, a distance of three or four miles.

Half an hour before the time of departure a crash was heard in the back yard, and presently Worm came in, saying partly to the world in general, partly to himself, and slightly to his auditors:

'Ay, ay, sure! That frying of fish will be the end of William Worm. They be at it again this morning – same as ever – fizz, fizz, fizz!'

'Your head bad again, Worm?' said Mr. Swancourt. 'What was that noise we heard in the yard?'

'Ay, sir, a weak wambling man am I; and the frying have been going on in my poor head all through the long night and this morning as usual; and I was so dazed wi' it that down fell a piece of leg-wood across the shaft of the pony-shay, and splintered it off. "Ay," says I, "I feel it as if 'twas

my own shay; and though I've done it, and parish pay is my lot if I go from here, perhaps I am as independent as one here and there."'

'Dear me, the shaft of the carriage broken!' cried Elfride. She was disappointed: Stephen doubly so. The vicar showed more warmth of temper than the accident seemed to demand, much to Stephen's uneasiness and rather to his surprise. He had not supposed so much latent sternness could co-exist with Mr. Swancourt's frankness and good-nature.

'You shall not be disappointed,' said the vicar at length. 'It is almost too long a distance for you to walk. Elfride can trot down on her pony, and you shall have my old nag, Smith.'

Elfride exclaimed triumphantly, 'You have never seen me on horseback – Oh, you must!' She looked at Stephen and read his thoughts immediately. 'Ah, you don't ride, Mr. Smith?'

'I am sorry to say I don't.'

'Fancy a man not able to ride!' said she rather pertly.

The vicar came to his rescue. 'That's common enough; he has had other lessons to learn. Now, I recommend this plan: let Elfride ride on horseback, and you, Mr. Smith, walk beside her.'

The arrangement was welcomed with secret delight by Stephen. It seemed to combine in itself all the advantages of a long slow ramble with Elfride, without the contingent possibility of the enjoyment being spoilt by her becoming weary. The pony was saddled and brought round.

'Now, Mr. Smith,' said the lady imperatively, coming downstairs, and appearing in her riding-habit, as she always did in a change of dress, like a new edition of a delightful volume, 'you have a task to perform to-day. These earrings are my very favourite darling ones; but the worst of it is that they have such short hooks that they are liable to be dropped if I toss my head about much, and when I am riding I can't give my mind to them. It would be doing me knight service if you keep your eyes fixed upon them, and remember them every minute of the day, and tell me directly I drop one. They have had such hairbreadth escapes, haven't they, Unity?' she continued to the parlour-maid who was standing at the door.

'Yes, miss, that they have!' said Unity with round-eyed commiseration.

'Once 'twas in the lane that I found one of them,' pursued Elfride reflectively.

'And then 'twas by the gate into Eighteen Acres,' Unity chimed in.

'And then 'twas on the carpet in my own room,' rejoined Elfride merrily.

'And then 'twas dangling on the embroidery of your petticoat, miss; and then 'twas down your back, miss, wasn't it? And oh, what a way you was in, miss, wasn't you? my! until you found it!'

Stephen took Elfride's slight foot upon his hand: 'One, two, three, and up!' she said.

Unfortunately not so. He staggered and lifted, and the horse edged round; and Elfride was ultimately deposited upon the ground rather more forcibly than was pleasant. Smith looked all contrition.

'Never mind,' said the vicar encouragingly; 'try again! 'Tis a little accomplishment that requires some practice, although it looks so easy. Stand closer to the horse's head, Mr. Smith.'

'Indeed, I shan't let him try again,' said she with a microscopic look of indignation. 'Worm, come here, and help me to mount.' Worm stepped forward, and she was in the saddle in a trice.

Then they moved on, going for some distance in silence, the hot air of the valley being occasionally brushed from their faces by a cool breeze, which wound its way along ravines leading up from the sea.

'I suppose,' said Stephen, 'that a man who can neither sit in a saddle himself nor help another person into one seems a useless incumbrance; but, Miss Swancourt, I'll learn to do it all for your sake; I will, indeed.'

'What is so unusual in you,' she said, in a didactic tone justifiable in a horsewoman's address to a benighted walker, 'is that your knowledge of certain things should be combined with your ignorance of certain other things.'

Stephen lifted his eyes earnestly to hers.

'You know,' he said, 'it is simply because there are so many other things to be learnt in this wide world that I didn't trouble about that particular bit of knowledge. I thought it would be useless to me; but I don't think so now. I will learn riding, and all connected with it, because then you would like me better. Do you like me much less for this?'

She looked sideways at him with critical meditation tenderly rendered.

'Do I seem like LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI?' she began suddenly, without replying to his question. 'Fancy yourself saying, Mr. Smith:

"I sat her on my pacing steed,
And nothing else saw all day long,
For sidelong would she bend, and sing
A fairy's song,
She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna dew;"

and that's all she did.'

'No, no,' said the young man stilly, and with a rising colour.

'"And sure in language strange she said,
I love thee true."'

'Not at all,' she rejoined quickly. 'See how I can gallop. Now, Pansy, off!' And Elfride started; and Stephen beheld her light figure contracting to the dimensions of a bird as she sank into the distance – her hair flowing.

He walked on in the same direction, and for a considerable time could see no signs of her returning. Dull as a flower without the sun he sat down upon a stone, and not for fifteen minutes was any sound of horse or rider to be heard. Then Elfride and Pansy appeared on the hill in a round trot.

'Such a delightful scamper as we have had!' she said, her face flushed and her eyes sparkling. She turned the horse's head, Stephen arose, and they went on again.

'Well, what have you to say to me, Mr. Smith, after my long absence?'

'Do you remember a question you could not exactly answer last night – whether I was more to you than anybody else?' said he.

'I cannot exactly answer now, either.'

'Why can't you?'

'Because I don't know if I am more to you than any one else.'

'Yes, indeed, you are!' he exclaimed in a voice of intensest appreciation, at the same time gliding round and looking into her face.

'Eyes in eyes,' he murmured playfully; and she blushingly obeyed, looking back into his.

'And why not lips on lips?' continued Stephen daringly.

'No, certainly not. Anybody might look; and it would be the death of me. You may kiss my hand if you like.'

He expressed by a look that to kiss a hand through a glove, and that a riding-glove, was not a great treat under the circumstances.

'There, then; I'll take my glove off. Isn't it a pretty white hand? Ah, you don't want to kiss it, and you shall not now!'

'If I do not, may I never kiss again, you severe Elfride! You know I think more of you than I can tell; that you are my queen. I would die for you, Elfride!'

A rapid red again filled her cheeks, and she looked at him meditatively. What a proud moment it was for Elfride then! She was ruling a heart with absolute despotism for the first time in her life.

Stephen stealthily pounced upon her hand.

'No; I won't, I won't!' she said intractably; 'and you shouldn't take me by surprise.'

There ensued a mild form of tussle for absolute possession of the much-coveted hand, in which the boisterousness of boy and girl was far more prominent than the dignity of man and woman. Then Pansy became restless. Elfride recovered her position and remembered herself.

'You make me behave in not a nice way at all!' she exclaimed, in a tone neither of pleasure nor anger, but partaking of both. 'I ought not to have allowed such a romp! We are too old now for that sort of thing.'

'I hope you don't think me too – too much of a creeping-round sort of man,' said he in a penitent tone, conscious that he too had lost a little dignity by the proceeding.

'You are too familiar; and I can't have it! Considering the shortness of the time we have known each other, Mr. Smith, you take too much upon you. You think I am a country girl, and it doesn't matter how you behave to me!'

'I assure you, Miss Swancourt, that I had no idea of freak in my mind. I wanted to imprint a sweet – serious kiss upon your hand; and that's all.'

'Now, that's creeping round again! And you mustn't look into my eyes so,' she said, shaking her head at him, and trotting on a few paces in advance. Thus she led the way out of the lane and across some fields in the direction of the cliffs. At the boundary of the fields nearest the sea she expressed a wish to dismount. The horse was tied to a post, and they both followed an irregular path, which ultimately terminated upon a flat ledge passing round the face of the huge blue-black rock at a height about midway between the sea and the topmost verge. There, far beneath and before them, lay the everlasting stretch of ocean; there, upon detached rocks, were the white screaming gulls, seeming ever intending to settle, and yet always passing on. Right and left ranked the toothed and zigzag line of storm-torn heights, forming the series which culminated in the one beneath their feet.

Behind the youth and maiden was a tempting alcove and seat, formed naturally in the beetling mass, and wide enough to admit two or three persons. Elfride sat down, and Stephen sat beside her.

'I am afraid it is hardly proper of us to be here, either,' she said half inquiringly. 'We have not known each other long enough for this kind of thing, have we!'

'Oh yes,' he replied judicially; 'quite long enough.'

'How do you know?'

'It is not length of time, but the manner in which our minutes beat, that makes enough or not enough in our acquaintanceship.'

'Yes, I see that. But I wish papa suspected or knew what a VERY NEW THING I am doing. He does not think of it at all.'

'Darling Elfie, I wish we could be married! It is wrong for me to say it – I know it is – before you know more; but I wish we might be, all the same. Do you love me deeply, deeply?'

'No!' she said in a fluster.

At this point-blank denial, Stephen turned his face away decisively, and preserved an ominous silence; the only objects of interest on earth for him being apparently the three or four-score sea-birds circling in the air afar off.

'I didn't mean to stop you quite,' she faltered with some alarm; and seeing that he still remained silent, she added more anxiously, 'If you say that again, perhaps, I will not be quite – quite so obstinate – if – if you don't like me to be.'

'Oh, my Elfride!' he exclaimed, and kissed her.

It was Elfride's first kiss. And so awkward and unused was she; full of striving – no relenting. There was none of those apparent struggles to get out of the trap which only results in getting further in: no final attitude of receptivity: no easy close of shoulder to shoulder, hand upon hand, face upon face, and, in spite of coyness, the lips in the right place at the supreme moment. That graceful though apparently accidental falling into position, which many have noticed as precipitating the end and

making sweethearts the sweeter, was not here. Why? Because experience was absent. A woman must have had many kisses before she kisses well.

In fact, the art of tendering the lips for these amatory salutes follows the principles laid down in treatises on legerdemain for performing the trick called Forcing a Card. The card is to be shifted nimbly, withdrawn, edged under, and withal not to be offered till the moment the unsuspecting person's hand reaches the pack; this forcing to be done so modestly and yet so coaxingly, that the person trifled with imagines he is really choosing what is in fact thrust into his hand.

Well, there were no such facilities now; and Stephen was conscious of it – first with a momentary regret that his kiss should be spoilt by her confused receipt of it, and then with the pleasant perception that her awkwardness was her charm.

'And you do care for me and love me?' said he.

'Yes.'

'Very much?'

'Yes.'

'And I mustn't ask you if you'll wait for me, and be my wife some day?'

'Why not?' she said naively.

'There is a reason why, my Elfride.'

'Not any one that I know of.'

'Suppose there is something connected with me which makes it almost impossible for you to agree to be my wife, or for your father to countenance such an idea?'

'Nothing shall make me cease to love you: no blemish can be found upon your personal nature. That is pure and generous, I know; and having that, how can I be cold to you?'

'And shall nothing else affect us – shall nothing beyond my nature be a part of my quality in your eyes, Elfie?'

'Nothing whatever,' she said with a breath of relief. 'Is that all? Some outside circumstance? What do I care?'

'You can hardly judge, dear, till you know what has to be judged. For that, we will stop till we get home. I believe in you, but I cannot feel bright.'

'Love is new, and fresh to us as the dew; and we are together. As the lover's world goes, this is a great deal. Stephen, I fancy I see the difference between me and you – between men and women generally, perhaps. I am content to build happiness on any accidental basis that may lie near at hand; you are for making a world to suit your happiness.'

'Elfride, you sometimes say things which make you seem suddenly to become five years older than you are, or than I am; and that remark is one. I couldn't think so OLD as that, try how I might… And no lover has ever kissed you before?'

'Never.'

'I knew that; you were so unused. You ride well, but you don't kiss nicely at all; and I was told once, by my friend Knight, that that is an excellent fault in woman.'

'Now, come; I must mount again, or we shall not be home by dinner-time.' And they returned to where Pansy stood tethered. 'Instead of entrusting my weight to a young man's unstable palm,' she continued gaily, 'I prefer a surer "upping-stock" (as the villagers call it), in the form of a gate. There – now I am myself again.'

They proceeded homeward at the same walking pace.

Her blitheness won Stephen out of his thoughtfulness, and each forgot everything but the tone of the moment.

'What did you love me for?' she said, after a long musing look at a flying bird.

'I don't know,' he replied idly.

'Oh yes, you do,' insisted Elfride.

'Perhaps, for your eyes.'

'What of them? – now, don't vex me by a light answer. What of my eyes?'

'Oh, nothing to be mentioned. They are indifferently good.'

'Come, Stephen, I won't have that. What did you love me for?'

'It might have been for your mouth?'

'Well, what about my mouth?'

'I thought it was a passable mouth enough – '

'That's not very comforting.'

'With a pretty pout and sweet lips; but actually, nothing more than what everybody has.'

'Don't make up things out of your head as you go on, there's a dear Stephen. Now – what – did – you – love – me – for?'

'Perhaps, 'twas for your neck and hair; though I am not sure: or for your idle blood, that did nothing but wander away from your cheeks and back again; but I am not sure. Or your hands and arms, that they eclipsed all other hands and arms; or your feet, that they played about under your dress like little mice; or your tongue, that it was of a dear delicate tone. But I am not altogether sure.'

'Ah, that's pretty to say; but I don't care for your love, if it made a mere flat picture of me in that way, and not being sure, and such cold reasoning; but what you FELT I was, you know, Stephen' (at this a stealthy laugh and frisky look into his face), 'when you said to yourself, "I'll certainly love that young lady."'

'I never said it.'

'When you said to yourself, then, "I never will love that young lady."'

'I didn't say that, either.'

'Then was it, "I suppose I must love that young lady?"'

'No.'

'What, then?'

''Twas much more fluctuating – not so definite.'

'Tell me; do, do.'

'It was that I ought not to think about you if I loved you truly.'

'Ah, that I don't understand. There's no getting it out of you. And I'll not ask you ever any more – never more – to say out of the deep reality of your heart what you loved me for.'

'Sweet tantalizer, what's the use? It comes to this sole simple thing: That at one time I had never seen you, and I didn't love you; that then I saw you, and I did love you. Is that enough?'

'Yes; I will make it do…I know, I think, what I love you for. You are nice-looking, of course; but I didn't mean for that. It is because you are so docile and gentle.'

'Those are not quite the correct qualities for a man to be loved for,' said Stephen, in rather a dissatisfied tone of self-criticism. 'Well, never mind. I must ask your father to allow us to be engaged directly we get indoors. It will be for a long time.'

'I like it the better…Stephen, don't mention it till to-morrow.'

'Why?'

'Because, if he should object – I don't think he will; but if he should – we shall have a day longer of happiness from our ignorance…Well, what are you thinking of so deeply?'

'I was thinking how my dear friend Knight would enjoy this scene. I wish he could come here.'

'You seem very much engrossed with him,' she answered, with a jealous little toss. 'He must be an interesting man to take up so much of your attention.'

'Interesting!' said Stephen, his face glowing with his fervour; 'noble, you ought to say.'

'Oh yes, yes; I forgot,' she said half satirically. 'The noblest man in England, as you told us last night.'

'He is a fine fellow, laugh as you will, Miss Elfie.'

'I know he is your hero. But what does he do? anything?'

'He writes.'

'What does he write? I have never heard of his name.'

'Because his personality, and that of several others like him, is absorbed into a huge WE, namely, the impalpable entity called the PRESENT – a social and literary Review.'

'Is he only a reviewer?'

'ONLY, Elfie! Why, I can tell you it is a fine thing to be on the staff of the PRESENT. Finer than being a novelist considerably.'

'That's a hit at me, and my poor COURT OF KELLYON CASTLE.'

'No, Elfride,' he whispered; 'I didn't mean that. I mean that he is really a literary man of some eminence, and not altogether a reviewer. He writes things of a higher class than reviews, though he reviews a book occasionally. His ordinary productions are social and ethical essays – all that the PRESENT contains which is not literary reviewing.'

'I admit he must be talented if he writes for the PRESENT. We have it sent to us irregularly. I want papa to be a subscriber, but he's so conservative. Now the next point in this Mr. Knight – I suppose he is a very good man.'

'An excellent man. I shall try to be his intimate friend some day.'

'But aren't you now?'

'No; not so much as that,' replied Stephen, as if such a supposition were extravagant. 'You see, it was in this way – he came originally from the same place as I, and taught me things; but I am not intimate with him. Shan't I be glad when I get richer and better known, and hob and nob with him!' Stephen's eyes sparkled.

A pout began to shape itself upon Elfride's soft lips. 'You think always of him, and like him better than you do me!'

'No, indeed, Elfride. The feeling is different quite. But I do like him, and he deserves even more affection from me than I give.'

'You are not nice now, and you make me as jealous as possible!' she exclaimed perversely. 'I know you will never speak to any third person of me so warmly as you do to me of him.'

'But you don't understand, Elfride,' he said with an anxious movement. 'You shall know him some day. He is so brilliant – no, it isn't exactly brilliant; so thoughtful – nor does thoughtful express him – that it would charm you to talk to him. He's a most desirable friend, and that isn't half I could say.'

'I don't care how good he is; I don't want to know him, because he comes between me and you. You think of him night and day, ever so much more than of anybody else; and when you are thinking of him, I am shut out of your mind.'

'No, dear Elfride; I love you dearly.'

'And I don't like you to tell me so warmly about him when you are in the middle of loving me. Stephen, suppose that I and this man Knight of yours were both drowning, and you could only save one of us – '

'Yes – the stupid old proposition – which would I save?

'Well, which? Not me.'

'Both of you,' he said, pressing her pendent hand.

'No, that won't do; only one of us.'

'I cannot say; I don't know. It is disagreeable – quite a horrid idea to have to handle.'

'A-ha, I know. You would save him, and let me drown, drown, drown; and I don't care about your love!'

She had endeavoured to give a playful tone to her words, but the latter speech was rather forced in its gaiety.

At this point in the discussion she trotted off to turn a corner which was avoided by the footpath, the road and the path reuniting at a point a little further on. On again making her appearance she continually managed to look in a direction away from him, and left him in the cool shade of her

displeasure. Stephen was soon beaten at this game of indifference. He went round and entered the range of her vision.

'Are you offended, Elfie? Why don't you talk?'

'Save me, then, and let that Mr. Clever of yours drown. I hate him. Now, which would you?'

'Really, Elfride, you should not press such a hard question. It is ridiculous.'

'Then I won't be alone with you any more. Unkind, to wound me so!' She laughed at her own absurdity but persisted.

'Come, Elfie, let's make it up and be friends.'

'Say you would save me, then, and let him drown.'

'I would save you – and him too.'

'And let him drown. Come, or you don't love me!' she teasingly went on.

'And let him drown,' he ejaculated despairingly.

'There; now I am yours!' she said, and a woman's flush of triumph lit her eyes.

'Only one earring, miss, as I'm alive,' said Unity on their entering the hall.

With a face expressive of wretched misgiving, Elfride's hand flew like an arrow to her ear.

'There!' she exclaimed to Stephen, looking at him with eyes full of reproach.

'I quite forgot, indeed. If I had only remembered!' he answered, with a conscience-stricken face.

She wheeled herself round, and turned into the shrubbery. Stephen followed.

'If you had told me to watch anything, Stephen, I should have religiously done it,' she capriciously went on, as soon as she heard him behind her.

'Forgetting is forgivable.'

'Well, you will find it, if you want me to respect you and be engaged to you when we have asked papa.' She considered a moment, and added more seriously, 'I know now where I dropped it, Stephen. It was on the cliff. I remember a faint sensation of some change about me, but I was too absent to think of it then. And that's where it is now, and you must go and look there.'

'I'll go at once.'

And he strode away up the valley, under a broiling sun and amid the deathlike silence of early afternoon. He ascended, with giddy-paced haste, the windy range of rocks to where they had sat, felt and peered about the stones and crannies, but Elfride's stray jewel was nowhere to be seen. Next Stephen slowly retraced his steps, and, pausing at a cross-road to reflect a while, he left the plateau and struck downwards across some fields, in the direction of Endelstow House.

He walked along the path by the river without the slightest hesitation as to its bearing, apparently quite familiar with every inch of the ground. As the shadows began to lengthen and the sunlight to mellow, he passed through two wicket-gates, and drew near the outskirts of Endelstow Park. The river now ran along under the park fence, previous to entering the grove itself, a little further on.

Here stood a cottage, between the fence and the stream, on a slightly elevated spot of ground, round which the river took a turn. The characteristic feature of this snug habitation was its one chimney in the gable end, its squareness of form disguised by a huge cloak of ivy, which had grown so luxuriantly and extended so far from its base, as to increase the apparent bulk of the chimney to the dimensions of a tower. Some little distance from the back of the house rose the park boundary, and over this were to be seen the sycamores of the grove, making slow inclinations to the just-awakening air.

Stephen crossed the little wood bridge in front, went up to the cottage door, and opened it without knock or signal of any kind.

Exclamations of welcome burst from some person or persons when the door was thrust ajar, followed by the scrape of chairs on a stone floor, as if pushed back by their occupiers in rising from a table. The door was closed again, and nothing could now be heard from within, save a lively chatter and the rattle of plates.

Chapter VIII

'Allen-a-Dale is no baron or lord.'

The mists were creeping out of pools and swamps for their pilgrimages of the night when Stephen came up to the front door of the vicarage. Elfride was standing on the step illuminated by a lemon-hued expanse of western sky.

'You never have been all this time looking for that earring?' she said anxiously.

'Oh no; and I have not found it.'

'Never mind. Though I am much vexed; they are my prettiest. But, Stephen, what ever have you been doing – where have you been? I have been so uneasy. I feared for you, knowing not an inch of the country. I thought, suppose he has fallen over the cliff! But now I am inclined to scold you for frightening me so.'

'I must speak to your father now,' he said rather abruptly; 'I have so much to say to him – and to you, Elfride.'

'Will what you have to say endanger this nice time of ours, and is it that same shadowy secret you allude to so frequently, and will it make me unhappy?'

'Possibly.'

She breathed heavily, and looked around as if for a prompter.

'Put it off till to-morrow,' she said.

He involuntarily sighed too.

'No; it must come to-night. Where is your father, Elfride?'

'Somewhere in the kitchen garden, I think,' she replied. 'That is his favourite evening retreat. I will leave you now. Say all that's to be said – do all there is to be done. Think of me waiting anxiously for the end.' And she re-entered the house.

She waited in the drawing-room, watching the lights sink to shadows, the shadows sink to darkness, until her impatience to know what had occurred in the garden could no longer be controlled. She passed round the shrubbery, unlatched the garden door, and skimmed with her keen eyes the whole twilighted space that the four walls enclosed and sheltered: they were not there. She mounted a little ladder, which had been used for gathering fruit, and looked over the wall into the field. This field extended to the limits of the glebe, which was enclosed on that side by a privet-hedge. Under the hedge was Mr. Swancourt, walking up and down, and talking aloud – to himself, as it sounded at first. No: another voice shouted occasional replies; and this interlocutor seemed to be on the other side of the hedge. The voice, though soft in quality, was not Stephen's.

The second speaker must have been in the long-neglected garden of an old manor-house hard by, which, together with a small estate attached, had lately been purchased by a person named Troyton, whom Elfride had never seen. Her father might have struck up an acquaintanceship with some member of that family through the privet-hedge, or a stranger to the neighbourhood might have wandered thither.

Well, there was no necessity for disturbing him.

And it seemed that, after all, Stephen had not yet made his desired communication to her father. Again she went indoors, wondering where Stephen could be. For want of something better to do, she went upstairs to her own little room. Here she sat down at the open window, and, leaning with her elbow on the table and her cheek upon her hand, she fell into meditation.

It was a hot and still August night. Every disturbance of the silence which rose to the dignity of a noise could be heard for miles, and the merest sound for a long distance. So she remained, thinking of Stephen, and wishing he had not deprived her of his company to no purpose, as it appeared. How delicate and sensitive he was, she reflected; and yet he was man enough to have a private mystery,

which considerably elevated him in her eyes. Thus, looking at things with an inward vision, she lost consciousness of the flight of time.

Strange conjunctions of circumstances, particularly those of a trivial everyday kind, are so frequent in an ordinary life, that we grow used to their unaccountableness, and forget the question whether the very long odds against such juxtaposition is not almost a disproof of it being a matter of chance at all. What occurred to Elfride at this moment was a case in point. She was vividly imagining, for the twentieth time, the kiss of the morning, and putting her lips together in the position another such a one would demand, when she heard the identical operation performed on the lawn, immediately beneath her window.

A kiss – not of the quiet and stealthy kind, but decisive, loud, and smart.

Her face flushed and she looked out, but to no purpose. The dark rim of the upland drew a keen sad line against the pale glow of the sky, unbroken except where a young cedar on the lawn, that had outgrown its fellow trees, shot its pointed head across the horizon, piercing the firmamental lustre like a sting.

It was just possible that, had any persons been standing on the grassy portions of the lawn, Elfride might have seen their dusky forms. But the shrubs, which once had merely dotted the glade, had now grown bushy and large, till they hid at least half the enclosure containing them. The kissing pair might have been behind some of these; at any rate, nobody was in sight.

Had no enigma ever been connected with her lover by his hints and absences, Elfride would never have thought of admitting into her mind a suspicion that he might be concerned in the foregoing enactment. But the reservations he at present insisted on, while they added to the mystery without which perhaps she would never have seriously loved him at all, were calculated to nourish doubts of all kinds, and with a slow flush of jealousy she asked herself, might he not be the culprit?

Elfride glided downstairs on tiptoe, and out to the precise spot on which she had parted from Stephen to enable him to speak privately to her father. Thence she wandered into all the nooks around the place from which the sound seemed to proceed – among the huge laurestines, about the tufts of pampas grasses, amid the variegated hollies, under the weeping wych-elm – nobody was there. Returning indoors she called 'Unity!'

'She is gone to her aunt's, to spend the evening,' said Mr. Swancourt, thrusting his head out of his study door, and letting the light of his candles stream upon Elfride's face – less revealing than, as it seemed to herself, creating the blush of uneasy perplexity that was burning upon her cheek.

'I didn't know you were indoors, papa,' she said with surprise. 'Surely no light was shining from the window when I was on the lawn?' and she looked and saw that the shutters were still open.

'Oh yes, I am in,' he said indifferently. 'What did you want Unity for? I think she laid supper before she went out.'

'Did she? – I have not been to see – I didn't want her for that.'

Elfride scarcely knew, now that a definite reason was required, what that reason was. Her mind for a moment strayed to another subject, unimportant as it seemed. The red ember of a match was lying inside the fender, which explained that why she had seen no rays from the window was because the candles had only just been lighted.

'I'll come directly,' said the vicar. 'I thought you were out somewhere with Mr. Smith.'

Even the inexperienced Elfride could not help thinking that her father must be wonderfully blind if he failed to perceive what was the nascent consequence of herself and Stephen being so unceremoniously left together; wonderfully careless, if he saw it and did not think about it; wonderfully good, if, as seemed to her by far the most probable supposition, he saw it and thought about it and approved of it. These reflections were cut short by the appearance of Stephen just outside the porch, silvered about the head and shoulders with touches of moonlight, that had begun to creep through the trees.

'Has your trouble anything to do with a kiss on the lawn?' she asked abruptly, almost passionately.

'Kiss on the lawn?'

'Yes!' she said, imperiously now.

'I didn't comprehend your meaning, nor do I now exactly. I certainly have kissed nobody on the lawn, if that is really what you want to know, Elfride.'

'You know nothing about such a performance?'

'Nothing whatever. What makes you ask?'

'Don't press me to tell; it is nothing of importance. And, Stephen, you have not yet spoken to papa about our engagement?'

'No,' he said regretfully, 'I could not find him directly; and then I went on thinking so much of what you said about objections, refusals – bitter words possibly – ending our happiness, that I resolved to put it off till to-morrow; that gives us one more day of delight – delight of a tremulous kind.'

'Yes; but it would be improper to be silent too long, I think,' she said in a delicate voice, which implied that her face had grown warm. 'I want him to know we love, Stephen. Why did you adopt as your own my thought of delay?'

'I will explain; but I want to tell you of my secret first – to tell you now. It is two or three hours yet to bedtime. Let us walk up the hill to the church.'

Elfride passively assented, and they went from the lawn by a side wicket, and ascended into the open expanse of moonlight which streamed around the lonely edifice on the summit of the hill.

The door was locked. They turned from the porch, and walked hand in hand to find a resting-place in the churchyard. Stephen chose a flat tomb, showing itself to be newer and whiter than those around it, and sitting down himself, gently drew her hand towards him.

'No, not there,' she said.

'Why not here?'

'A mere fancy; but never mind.' And she sat down.

'Elfie, will you love me, in spite of everything that may be said against me?'

'O Stephen, what makes you repeat that so continually and so sadly? You know I will. Yes, indeed,' she said, drawing closer, 'whatever may be said of you – and nothing bad can be – I will cling to you just the same. Your ways shall be my ways until I die.'

'Did you ever think what my parents might be, or what society I originally moved in?'

'No, not particularly. I have observed one or two little points in your manners which are rather quaint – no more. I suppose you have moved in the ordinary society of professional people.'

'Supposing I have not – that none of my family have a profession except me?'

'I don't mind. What you are only concerns me.'

'Where do you think I went to school – I mean, to what kind of school?'

'Dr. Somebody's academy,' she said simply.

'No. To a dame school originally, then to a national school.'

'Only to those! Well, I love you just as much, Stephen, dear Stephen,' she murmured tenderly, 'I do indeed. And why should you tell me these things so impressively? What do they matter to me?'

He held her closer and proceeded:

'What do you think my father is – does for his living, that is to say?'

'He practises some profession or calling, I suppose.'

'No; he is a mason.'

'A Freemason?'

'No; a cottager and journeyman mason.'

Elfride said nothing at first. After a while she whispered:

'That is a strange idea to me. But never mind; what does it matter?'

'But aren't you angry with me for not telling you before?'

'No, not at all. Is your mother alive?'

'Yes.'

'Is she a nice lady?'

'Very – the best mother in the world. Her people had been well-to-do yeomen for centuries, but she was only a dairymaid.'

'O Stephen!' came from her in whispered exclamation.

'She continued to attend to a dairy long after my father married her,' pursued Stephen, without further hesitation. 'And I remember very well how, when I was very young, I used to go to the milking, look on at the skimming, sleep through the churning, and make believe I helped her. Ah, that was a happy time enough!'

'No, never – not happy.'

'Yes, it was.'

'I don't see how happiness could be where the drudgery of dairy-work had to be done for a living – the hands red and chapped, and the shoes clogged…Stephen, I do own that it seems odd to regard you in the light of – of – having been so rough in your youth, and done menial things of that kind.' (Stephen withdrew an inch or two from her side.) 'But I DO LOVE YOU just the same,' she continued, getting closer under his shoulder again, 'and I don't care anything about the past; and I see that you are all the worthier for having pushed on in the world in such a way.'

'It is not my worthiness; it is Knight's, who pushed me.'

'Ah, always he – always he!'

'Yes, and properly so. Now, Elfride, you see the reason of his teaching me by letter. I knew him years before he went to Oxford, but I had not got far enough in my reading for him to entertain the idea of helping me in classics till he left home. Then I was sent away from the village, and we very seldom met; but he kept up this system of tuition by correspondence with the greatest regularity. I will tell you all the story, but not now. There is nothing more to say now, beyond giving places, persons, and dates.' His voice became timidly slow at this point.

'No; don't take trouble to say more. You are a dear honest fellow to say so much as you have; and it is not so dreadful either. It has become a normal thing that millionaires commence by going up to London with their tools at their back, and half-a-crown in their pockets. That sort of origin is getting so respected,' she continued cheerfully, 'that it is acquiring some of the odour of Norman ancestry.'

'Ah, if I had MADE my fortune, I shouldn't mind. But I am only a possible maker of it as yet.'

'It is quite enough. And so THIS is what your trouble was?'

'I thought I was doing wrong in letting you love me without telling you my story; and yet I feared to do so, Elfie. I dreaded to lose you, and I was cowardly on that account.'

'How plain everything about you seems after this explanation! Your peculiarities in chess-playing, the pronunciation papa noticed in your Latin, your odd mixture of book-knowledge with ignorance of ordinary social accomplishments, are accounted for in a moment. And has this anything to do with what I saw at Lord Luxellian's?'

'What did you see?'

'I saw the shadow of yourself putting a cloak round a lady. I was at the side door; you two were in a room with the window towards me. You came to me a moment later.'

'She was my mother.'

'Your mother THERE!' She withdrew herself to look at him silently in her interest.

'Elfride,' said Stephen, 'I was going to tell you the remainder to-morrow – I have been keeping it back – I must tell it now, after all. The remainder of my revelation refers to where my parents are. Where do you think they live? You know them – by sight at any rate.'

'I know them!' she said in suspended amazement.

'Yes. My father is John Smith, Lord Luxellian's master-mason, who lives under the park wall by the river.'

'O Stephen! can it be?'

'He built – or assisted at the building of the house you live in, years ago. He put up those stone gate piers at the lodge entrance to Lord Luxellian's park. My grandfather planted the trees that belt in your lawn; my grandmother – who worked in the fields with him – held each tree upright whilst he filled in the earth: they told me so when I was a child. He was the sexton, too, and dug many of the graves around us.'

'And was your unaccountable vanishing on the first morning of your arrival, and again this afternoon, a run to see your father and mother?..I understand now; no wonder you seemed to know your way about the village!'

'No wonder. But remember, I have not lived here since I was nine years old. I then went to live with my uncle, a blacksmith, near Exonbury, in order to be able to attend a national school as a day scholar; there was none on this remote coast then. It was there I met with my friend Knight. And when I was fifteen and had been fairly educated by the school-master – and more particularly by Knight – I was put as a pupil in an architect's office in that town, because I was skilful in the use of the pencil. A full premium was paid by the efforts of my mother and father, rather against the wishes of Lord Luxellian, who likes my father, however, and thinks a great deal of him. There I stayed till six months ago, when I obtained a situation as improver, as it is called, in a London office. That's all of me.'

'To think YOU, the London visitor, the town man, should have been born here, and have known this village so many years before I did. How strange – how very strange it seems to me!' she murmured.

'My mother curtseyed to you and your father last Sunday,' said Stephen, with a pained smile at the thought of the incongruity. 'And your papa said to her, "I am glad to see you so regular at church, JANE."'

'I remember it, but I have never spoken to her. We have only been here eighteen months, and the parish is so large.'

'Contrast with this,' said Stephen, with a miserable laugh, 'your father's belief in my "blue blood," which is still prevalent in his mind. The first night I came, he insisted upon proving my descent from one of the most ancient west-county families, on account of my second Christian name; when the truth is, it was given me because my grandfather was assistant gardener in the Fitzmaurice-Smith family for thirty years. Having seen your face, my darling, I had not heart to contradict him, and tell him what would have cut me off from a friendly knowledge of you.'

She sighed deeply. 'Yes, I see now how this inequality may be made to trouble us,' she murmured, and continued in a low, sad whisper, 'I wouldn't have minded if they had lived far away. Papa might have consented to an engagement between us if your connection had been with villagers a hundred miles off; remoteness softens family contrasts. But he will not like – O Stephen, Stephen! what can I do?'

'Do?' he said tentatively, yet with heaviness. 'Give me up; let me go back to London, and think no more of me.'

'No, no; I cannot give you up! This hopelessness in our affairs makes me care more for you…I see what did not strike me at first. Stephen, why do we trouble? Why should papa object? An architect in London is an architect in London. Who inquires there? Nobody. We shall live there, shall we not? Why need we be so alarmed?'

'And Elfie,' said Stephen, his hopes kindling with hers, 'Knight thinks nothing of my being only a cottager's son; he says I am as worthy of his friendship as if I were a lord's; and if I am worthy of his friendship, I am worthy of you, am I not, Elfride?'

'I not only have never loved anybody but you,' she said, instead of giving an answer, 'but I have not even formed a strong friendship, such as you have for Knight. I wish you hadn't. It diminishes me.'

'Now, Elfride, you know better,' he said wooingly. 'And had you really never any sweetheart at all?'

'None that was ever recognized by me as such.'

‘But did nobody ever love you?’

‘Yes – a man did once; very much, he said.’

‘How long ago?’

‘Oh, a long time.’

‘How long, dearest?

‘A twelvemonth.’

‘That’s not VERY long’ (rather disappointedly).

‘I said long, not very long.’

‘And did he want to marry you?’

‘I believe he did. But I didn’t see anything in him. He was not good enough, even if I had loved him.’

‘May I ask what he was?’

‘A farmer.’

‘A farmer not good enough – how much better than my family!’ Stephen murmured.

‘Where is he now?’ he continued to Elfride.

‘HERE.’

‘Here! what do you mean by that?’

‘I mean that he is here.’

‘Where here?’

‘Under us. He is under this tomb. He is dead, and we are sitting on his grave.’

‘Elfie,’ said the young man, standing up and looking at the tomb, ‘how odd and sad that revelation seems! It quite depresses me for the moment.’

‘Stephen! I didn’t wish to sit here; but you would do so.’

‘You never encouraged him?’

‘Never by look, word, or sign,’ she said solemnly. ‘He died of consumption, and was buried the day you first came.’

‘Let us go away. I don’t like standing by HIM, even if you never loved him. He was BEFORE me.’

‘Worries make you unreasonable,’ she half pouted, following Stephen at the distance of a few steps. ‘Perhaps I ought to have told you before we sat down. Yes; let us go.’

Chapter IX

'Her father did fume'

Oppressed, in spite of themselves, by a foresight of impending complications, Elfride and Stephen returned down the hill hand in hand. At the door they paused wistfully, like children late at school.

Women accept their destiny more readily than men. Elfride had now resigned herself to the overwhelming idea of her lover's sorry antecedents; Stephen had not forgotten the trifling grievance that Elfride had known earlier admiration than his own.

'What was that young man's name?' he inquired.

'Felix Jethway; a widow's only son.'

'I remember the family.'

'She hates me now. She says I killed him.'

Stephen mused, and they entered the porch.

'Stephen, I love only you,' she tremulously whispered. He pressed her fingers, and the trifling shadow passed away, to admit again the mutual and more tangible trouble.

The study appeared to be the only room lighted up. They entered, each with a demeanour intended to conceal the inconcealable fact that reciprocal love was their dominant chord. Elfride perceived a man, sitting with his back towards herself, talking to her father. She would have retired, but Mr. Swancourt had seen her.

'Come in,' he said; 'it is only Martin Cannister, come for a copy of the register for poor Mrs. Jethway.'

Martin Cannister, the sexton, was rather a favourite with Elfride. He used to absorb her attention by telling her of his strange experiences in digging up after long years the bodies of persons he had known, and recognizing them by some little sign (though in reality he had never recognized any). He had shrewd small eyes and a great wealth of double chin, which compensated in some measure for considerable poverty of nose.

The appearance of a slip of paper in Cannister's hand, and a few shillings lying on the table in front of him, denoted that the business had been transacted, and the tenor of their conversation went to show that a summary of village news was now engaging the attention of parishioner and parson.

Mr. Cannister stood up and touched his forehead over his eye with his finger, in respectful salutation of Elfride, gave half as much salute to Stephen (whom he, in common with other villagers, had never for a moment recognized), then sat down again and resumed his discourse.

'Where had I got on to, sir?'

'To driving the pile,' said Mr. Swancourt.

'The pile 'twas. So, as I was saying, Nat was driving the pile in this manner, as I might say.' Here Mr. Cannister held his walking-stick scrupulously vertical with his left hand, and struck a blow with great force on the knob of the stick with his right. 'John was steadying the pile so, as I might say.' Here he gave the stick a slight shake, and looked firmly in the various eyes around to see that before proceeding further his listeners well grasped the subject at that stage. 'Well, when Nat had struck some half-dozen blows more upon the pile, 'a stopped for a second or two. John, thinking he had done striking, put his hand upon the top o' the pile to gie en a pull, and see if 'a were firm in the ground.' Mr. Cannister spread his hand over the top of the stick, completely covering it with his palm. 'Well, so to speak, Nat hadn't maned to stop striking, and when John had put his hand upon the pile, the beetle – '

'Oh dreadful!' said Elfride.

'The beetle was already coming down, you see, sir. Nat just caught sight of his hand, but couldn't stop the blow in time. Down came the beetle upon poor John Smith's hand, and squashed en to a pummy.'

'Dear me, dear me! poor fellow!' said the vicar, with an intonation like the groans of the wounded in a pianoforte performance of the 'Battle of Prague.'

'John Smith, the master-mason?' cried Stephen hurriedly.

'Ay, no other; and a better-hearted man God A'mighty never made.'

'Is he so much hurt?'

'I have heard,' said Mr. Swancourt, not noticing Stephen, 'that he has a son in London, a very promising young fellow.'

'Oh, how he must be hurt!' repeated Stephen.

'A beetle couldn't hurt very little. Well, sir, good-night t'ye; and ye, sir; and you, miss, I'm sure.'

Mr. Cannister had been making unnoticeable motions of withdrawal, and by the time this farewell remark came from his lips he was just outside the door of the room. He tramped along the hall, stayed more than a minute endeavouring to close the door properly, and then was lost to their hearing.

Stephen had meanwhile turned and said to the vicar:

'Please excuse me this evening! I must leave. John Smith is my father.'

The vicar did not comprehend at first.

'What did you say?' he inquired.

'John Smith is my father,' said Stephen deliberately.

A surplus tinge of redness rose from Mr. Swancourt's neck, and came round over his face, the lines of his features became more firmly defined, and his lips seemed to get thinner. It was evident that a series of little circumstances, hitherto unheeded, were now fitting themselves together, and forming a lucid picture in Mr. Swancourt's mind in such a manner as to render useless further explanation on Stephen's part.

'Indeed,' the vicar said, in a voice dry and without inflection.

This being a word which depends entirely upon its tone for its meaning, Mr. Swancourt's enunciation was equivalent to no expression at all.

'I have to go now,' said Stephen, with an agitated bearing, and a movement as if he scarcely knew whether he ought to run off or stay longer. 'On my return, sir, will you kindly grant me a few minutes' private conversation?'

'Certainly. Though antecedently it does not seem possible that there can be anything of the nature of private business between us.'

Mr. Swancourt put on his straw hat, crossed the drawing-room, into which the moonlight was shining, and stepped out of the French window into the verandah. It required no further effort to perceive what, indeed, reasoning might have foretold as the natural colour of a mind whose pleasures were taken amid genealogies, good dinners, and patrician reminiscences, that Mr. Swancourt's prejudices were too strong for his generosity, and that Stephen's moments as his friend and equal were numbered, or had even now ceased.

Stephen moved forward as if he would follow the vicar, then as if he would not, and in absolute perplexity whither to turn himself, went awkwardly to the door. Elfride followed lingeringly behind him. Before he had receded two yards from the doorstep, Unity and Ann the housemaid came home from their visit to the village.

'Have you heard anything about John Smith? The accident is not so bad as was reported, is it?' said Elfride intuitively.

'Oh no; the doctor says it is only a bad bruise.'

'I thought so!' cried Elfride gladly.

'He says that, although Nat believes he did not check the beetle as it came down, he must have done so without knowing it – checked it very considerably too; for the full blow would have knocked his hand abroad, and in reality it is only made black-and-blue like.'

'How thankful I am!' said Stephen.

The perplexed Unity looked at him with her mouth rather than with her eyes.

'That will do, Unity,' said Elfride magisterially; and the two maids passed on.

'Elfride, do you forgive me?' said Stephen with a faint smile. 'No man is fair in love;' and he took her fingers lightly in his own.

With her head thrown sideways in the Greuze attitude, she looked a tender reproach at his doubt and pressed his hand. Stephen returned the pressure threefold, then hastily went off to his father's cottage by the wall of Endelstow Park.

'Elfride, what have you to say to this?' inquired her father, coming up immediately Stephen had retired.

With feminine quickness she grasped at any straw that would enable her to plead his cause. 'He had told me of it,' she faltered; 'so that it is not a discovery in spite of him. He was just coming in to tell you.'

'COMING to tell! Why hadn't he already told? I object as much, if not more, to his underhand concealment of this, than I do to the fact itself. It looks very much like his making a fool of me, and of you too. You and he have been about together, and corresponding together, in a way I don't at all approve of – in a most unseemly way. You should have known how improper such conduct is. A woman can't be too careful not to be seen alone with I-don't-know-whom.'

'You saw us, papa, and have never said a word.'

'My fault, of course; my fault. What the deuce could I be thinking of! He, a villager's son; and we, Swancourts, connections of the Luxellians. We have been coming to nothing for centuries, and now I believe we have got there. What shall I next invite here, I wonder!'

Elfride began to cry at this very unpropitious aspect of affairs. 'O papa, papa, forgive me and him! We care so much for one another, papa – O, so much! And what he was going to ask you is, if you will allow of an engagement between us till he is a gentleman as good as you. We are not in a hurry, dear papa; we don't want in the least to marry now; not until he is richer. Only will you let us be engaged, because I love him so, and he loves me?'

Mr. Swancourt's feelings were a little touched by this appeal, and he was annoyed that such should be the case. 'Certainly not!' he replied. He pronounced the inhibition lengthily and sonorously, so that the 'not' sounded like 'n-o-o-o-t!'

'No, no, no; don't say it!'

'Foh! A fine story. It is not enough that I have been deluded and disgraced by having him here, – the son of one of my village peasants, – but now I am to make him my son-in-law! Heavens above us, are you mad, Elfride?'

'You have seen his letters come to me ever since his first visit, papa, and you knew they were a sort of – love-letters; and since he has been here you have let him be alone with me almost entirely; and you guessed, you must have guessed, what we were thinking of, and doing, and you didn't stop him. Next to love-making comes love-winning, and you knew it would come to that, papa.'

The vicar parried this common-sense thrust. 'I know – since you press me so – I know I did guess some childish attachment might arise between you; I own I did not take much trouble to prevent it; but I have not particularly countenanced it; and, Elfride, how can you expect that I should now? It is impossible; no father in England would hear of such a thing.'

'But he is the same man, papa; the same in every particular; and how can he be less fit for me than he was before?'

'He appeared a young man with well-to-do friends, and a little property; but having neither, he is another man.'

‘You inquired nothing about him?’

‘I went by Hewby’s introduction. He should have told me. So should the young man himself; of course he should. I consider it a most dishonourable thing to come into a man’s house like a treacherous I-don’t-know-what.’

‘But he was afraid to tell you, and so should I have been. He loved me too well to like to run the risk. And as to speaking of his friends on his first visit, I don’t see why he should have done so at all. He came here on business: it was no affair of ours who his parents were. And then he knew that if he told you he would never be asked here, and would perhaps never see me again. And he wanted to see me. Who can blame him for trying, by any means, to stay near me – the girl he loves? All is fair in love. I have heard you say so yourself, papa; and you yourself would have done just as he has – so would any man.’

‘And any man, on discovering what I have discovered, would also do as I do, and mend my mistake; that is, get shot of him again, as soon as the laws of hospitality will allow.’ But Mr. Swancourt then remembered that he was a Christian. ‘I would not, for the world, seem to turn him out of doors,’ he added; ‘but I think he will have the tact to see that he cannot stay long after this, with good taste.’

‘He will, because he’s a gentleman. See how graceful his manners are,’ Elfride went on; though perhaps Stephen’s manners, like the feats of Euryalus, owed their attractiveness in her eyes rather to the attractiveness of his person than to their own excellence.

‘Ay; anybody can be what you call graceful, if he lives a little time in a city, and keeps his eyes open. And he might have picked up his gentlemanliness by going to the galleries of theatres, and watching stage drawing-room manners. He reminds me of one of the worst stories I ever heard in my life.’

‘What story was that?’

‘Oh no, thank you! I wouldn’t tell you such an improper matter for the world!’

‘If his father and mother had lived in the north or east of England,’ gallantly persisted Elfride, though her sobs began to interrupt her articulation, ‘anywhere but here – you – would have – only regarded – HIM, and not THEM! His station – would have – been what – his profession makes it, – and not fixed by – his father’s humble position – at all; whom he never lives with – now. Though John Smith has saved lots of money, and is better off than we are, they say, or he couldn’t have put his son to such an expensive profession. And it is clever and – honourable – of Stephen, to be the best of his family.’

‘Yes. “Let a beast be lord of beasts, and his crib shall stand at the king’s mess.”’

‘You insult me, papa!’ she burst out. ‘You do, you do! He is my own Stephen, he is!’

‘That may or may not be true, Elfride,’ returned her father, again uncomfortably agitated in spite of himself ‘You confuse future probabilities with present facts, – what the young man may be with what he is. We must look at what he is, not what an improbable degree of success in his profession may make him. The case is this: the son of a working-man in my parish who may or may not be able to buy me up – a youth who has not yet advanced so far into life as to have any income of his own deserving the name, and therefore of his father’s degree as regards station – wants to be engaged to you. His family are living in precisely the same spot in England as yours, so throughout this county – which is the world to us – you would always be known as the wife of Jack Smith the mason’s son, and not under any circumstances as the wife of a London professional man. It is the drawback, not the compensating fact, that is talked of always. There, say no more. You may argue all night, and prove what you will; I’ll stick to my words.’

Elfride looked silently and hopelessly out of the window with large heavy eyes and wet cheeks.

‘I call it great temerity – and long to call it audacity – in Hewby,’ resumed her father. ‘I never heard such a thing – giving such a hobbledehoy native of this place such an introduction to me as he did. Naturally you were deceived as well as I was. I don’t blame you at all, so far.’ He went and searched for Mr. Hewby’s original letter. ‘Here’s what he said to me: “Dear Sir, – Agreeably to your

request of the 18th instant, I have arranged to survey and make drawings," et cetera. "My assistant, Mr. Stephen Smith," – assistant, you see he called him, and naturally I understood him to mean a sort of partner. Why didn't he say "clerk"?'

'They never call them clerks in that profession, because they do not write. Stephen – Mr. Smith – told me so. So that Mr. Hewby simply used the accepted word.'

'Let me speak, please, Elfride! My assistant, Mr. Stephen Smith, will leave London by the early train to-morrow morning…MANY THANKS FOR YOUR PROPOSAL TO ACCOMMODATE HIM…YOU MAY PUT EVERY CONFIDENCE IN HIM, and may rely upon his discernment in the matter of church architecture." Well, I repeat that Hewby ought to be ashamed of himself for making so much of a poor lad of that sort.'

'Professional men in London,' Elfride argued, 'don't know anything about their clerks' fathers and mothers. They have assistants who come to their offices and shops for years, and hardly even know where they live. What they can do – what profits they can bring the firm – that's all London men care about. And that is helped in him by his faculty of being uniformly pleasant.'

'Uniform pleasantness is rather a defect than a faculty. It shows that a man hasn't sense enough to know whom to despise.'

'It shows that he acts by faith and not by sight, as those you claim succession from directed.'

'That's some more of what he's been telling you, I suppose! Yes, I was inclined to suspect him, because he didn't care about sauces of any kind. I always did doubt a man's being a gentleman if his palate had no acquired tastes. An unedified palate is the irrepressible cloven foot of the upstart. The idea of my bringing out a bottle of my '40 Martinez – only eleven of them left now – to a man who didn't know it from eighteenpenny! Then the Latin line he gave to my quotation; it was very cut-and-dried, very; or I, who haven't looked into a classical author for the last eighteen years, shouldn't have remembered it. Well, Elfride, you had better go to your room; you'll get over this bit of tomfoolery in time.'

'No, no, no, papa,' she moaned. For of all the miseries attaching to miserable love, the worst is the misery of thinking that the passion which is the cause of them all may cease.

'Elfride,' said her father with rough friendliness, 'I have an excellent scheme on hand, which I cannot tell you of now. A scheme to benefit you and me. It has been thrust upon me for some little time – yes, thrust upon me – but I didn't dream of its value till this afternoon, when the revelation came. I should be most unwise to refuse to entertain it.'

'I don't like that word,' she returned wearily. 'You have lost so much already by schemes. Is it those wretched mines again?'

'No; not a mining scheme.'

'Railways?'

'Nor railways. It is like those mysterious offers we see advertised, by which any gentleman with no brains at all may make so much a week without risk, trouble, or soiling his fingers. However, I am intending to say nothing till it is settled, though I will just say this much, that you soon may have other fish to fry than to think of Stephen Smith. Remember, I wish, not to be angry, but friendly, to the young man; for your sake I'll regard him as a friend in a certain sense. But this is enough; in a few days you will be quite my way of thinking. There, now, go to your bedroom. Unity shall bring you up some supper. I wish you not to be here when he comes back.'

Chapter X

'Beneath the shelter of an aged tree.'

Stephen retraced his steps towards the cottage he had visited only two or three hours previously. He drew near and under the rich foliage growing about the outskirts of Endelstow Park, the spotty lights and shades from the shining moon maintaining a race over his head and down his back in an endless gambol. When he crossed the plank bridge and entered the garden-gate, he saw an illuminated figure coming from the enclosed plot towards the house on the other side. It was his father, with his hand in a sling, taking a general moonlight view of the garden, and particularly of a plot of the youngest of young turnips, previous to closing the cottage for the night.

He saluted his son with customary force. 'Hallo, Stephen! We should ha' been in bed in another ten minutes. Come to see what's the matter wi' me, I suppose, my lad?'

The doctor had come and gone, and the hand had been pronounced as injured but slightly, though it might possibly have been considered a far more serious case if Mr. Smith had been a more important man. Stephen's anxious inquiry drew from his father words of regret at the inconvenience to the world of his doing nothing for the next two days, rather than of concern for the pain of the accident. Together they entered the house.

John Smith – brown as autumn as to skin, white as winter as to clothes – was a satisfactory specimen of the village artificer in stone. In common with most rural mechanics, he had too much individuality to be a typical 'working-man' – a resultant of that beach-pebble attrition with his kind only to be experienced in large towns, which metamorphoses the unit Self into a fraction of the unit Class.

There was not the speciality in his labour which distinguishes the handicraftsmen of towns. Though only a mason, strictly speaking, he was not above handling a brick, if bricks were the order of the day; or a slate or tile, if a roof had to be covered before the wet weather set in, and nobody was near who could do it better. Indeed, on one or two occasions in the depth of winter, when frost peremptorily forbids all use of the trowel, making foundations to settle, stones to fly, and mortar to crumble, he had taken to felling and sawing trees. Moreover, he had practised gardening in his own plot for so many years that, on an emergency, he might have made a living by that calling.

Probably our countryman was not such an accomplished artificer in a particular direction as his town brethren in the trades. But he was, in truth, like that clumsy pin-maker who made the whole pin, and who was despised by Adam Smith on that account and respected by Macaulay, much more the artist nevertheless.

Appearing now, indoors, by the light of the candle, his stalwart healthiness was a sight to see. His beard was close and knotted as that of a chiselled Hercules; his shirt sleeves were partly rolled up, his waistcoat unbuttoned; the difference in hue between the snowy linen and the ruddy arms and face contrasting like the white of an egg and its yolk. Mrs. Smith, on hearing them enter, advanced from the pantry.

Mrs. Smith was a matron whose countenance addressed itself to the mind rather than to the eye, though not exclusively. She retained her personal freshness even now, in the prosy afternoon-time of her life; but what her features were primarily indicative of was a sound common sense behind them; as a whole, appearing to carry with them a sort of argumentative commentary on the world in general.

The details of the accident were then rehearsed by Stephen's father, in the dramatic manner also common to Martin Cannister, other individuals of the neighbourhood, and the rural world generally. Mrs. Smith threw in her sentiments between the acts, as Coryphaeus of the tragedy, to make the description complete. The story at last came to an end, as the longest will, and Stephen directed the conversation into another channel.

'Well, mother, they know everything about me now,' he said quietly.

'Well done!' replied his father; 'now my mind's at peace.'

'I blame myself – I never shall forgive myself – for not telling them before,' continued the young man.

Mrs. Smith at this point abstracted her mind from the former subject. 'I don't see what you have to grieve about, Stephen,' she said. 'People who accidentally get friends don't, as a first stroke, tell the history of their families.'

'Ye've done no wrong, certainly,' said his father.

'No; but I should have spoken sooner. There's more in this visit of mine than you think – a good deal more.'

'Not more than I think,' Mrs. Smith replied, looking contemplatively at him. Stephen blushed; and his father looked from one to the other in a state of utter incomprehension.

'She's a pretty piece enough,' Mrs. Smith continued, 'and very lady-like and clever too. But though she's very well fit for you as far as that is, why, mercy 'pon me, what ever do you want any woman at all for yet?'

John made his naturally short mouth a long one, and wrinkled his forehead, 'That's the way the wind d'blow, is it?' he said.

'Mother,' exclaimed Stephen, 'how absurdly you speak! Criticizing whether she's fit for me or no, as if there were room for doubt on the matter! Why, to marry her would be the great blessing of my life – socially and practically, as well as in other respects. No such good fortune as that, I'm afraid; she's too far above me. Her family doesn't want such country lads as I in it.'

'Then if they don't want you, I'd see them dead corpses before I'd want them, and go to better families who do want you.'

'Ah, yes; but I could never put up with the distaste of being welcomed among such people as you mean, whilst I could get indifference among such people as hers.'

'What crazy twist o' thinking will enter your head next?' said his mother. 'And come to that, she's not a bit too high for you, or you too low for her. See how careful I be to keep myself up. I'm sure I never stop for more than a minute together to talk to any journeymen people; and I never invite anybody to our party o' Christmases who are not in business for themselves. And I talk to several toppermost carriage people that come to my lord's without saying ma'am or sir to 'em, and they take it as quiet as lambs.'

'You curtseyed to the vicar, mother; and I wish you hadn't.'

'But it was before he called me by my Christian name, or he would have got very little curtseying from me!' said Mrs. Smith, bridling and sparkling with vexation. 'You go on at me, Stephen, as if I were your worst enemy! What else could I do with the man to get rid of him, banging it into me and your father by side and by seam, about his greatness, and what happened when he was a young fellow at college, and I don't know what-all; the tongue o' en flopping round his mouth like a mop-rag round a dairy. That 'a did, didn't he, John?'

'That's about the size o't,' replied her husband.

'Every woman now-a-days,' resumed Mrs. Smith, 'if she marry at all, must expect a father-in-law of a rank lower than her father. The men have gone up so, and the women have stood still. Every man you meet is more the dand than his father; and you are just level wi' her.'

'That's what she thinks herself.'

'It only shows her sense. I knew she was after 'ee, Stephen – I knew it.'

'After me! Good Lord, what next!'

'And I really must say again that you ought not to be in such a hurry, and wait for a few years. You might go higher than a bankrupt pa'son's girl then.'

'The fact is, mother,' said Stephen impatiently, 'you don't know anything about it. I shall never go higher, because I don't want to, nor should I if I lived to be a hundred. As to you saying that she's

after me, I don't like such a remark about her, for it implies a scheming woman, and a man worth scheming for, both of which are not only untrue, but ludicrously untrue, of this case. Isn't it so, father?'

'I'm afraid I don't understand the matter well enough to gie my opinion,' said his father, in the tone of the fox who had a cold and could not smell.

'She couldn't have been very backward anyhow, considering the short time you have known her,' said his mother. 'Well I think that five years hence you'll be plenty young enough to think of such things. And really she can very well afford to wait, and will too, take my word. Living down in an out-step place like this, I am sure she ought to be very thankful that you took notice of her. She'd most likely have died an old maid if you hadn't turned up.'

'All nonsense,' said Stephen, but not aloud.

'A nice little thing she is,' Mrs. Smith went on in a more complacent tone now that Stephen had been talked down; 'there's not a word to say against her, I'll own. I see her sometimes decked out like a horse going to fair, and I admire her for't. A perfect little lady. But people can't help their thoughts, and if she'd learnt to make figures instead of letters when she was at school 'twould have been better for her pocket; for as I said, there never were worse times for such as she than now.'

'Now, now, mother!' said Stephen with smiling deprecation.

'But I will!' said his mother with asperity. 'I don't read the papers for nothing, and I know men all move up a stage by marriage. Men of her class, that is, parsons, marry squires' daughters; squires marry lords' daughters; lords marry dukes' daughters; dukes marry queens' daughters. All stages of gentlemen mate a stage higher; and the lowest stage of gentlewomen are left single, or marry out of their class.'

'But you said just now, dear mother – ' retorted Stephen, unable to resist the temptation of showing his mother her inconsistency. Then he paused.

'Well, what did I say?' And Mrs. Smith prepared her lips for a new campaign.

Stephen, regretting that he had begun, since a volcano might be the consequence, was obliged to go on.

'You said I wasn't out of her class just before.'

'Yes, there, there! That's you; that's my own flesh and blood. I'll warrant that you'll pick holes in everything your mother says, if you can, Stephen. You are just like your father for that; take anybody's part but mine. Whilst I am speaking and talking and trying and slaving away for your good, you are waiting to catch me out in that way. So you are in her class, but 'tis what HER people would CALL marrying out of her class. Don't be so quarrelsome, Stephen!'

Stephen preserved a discreet silence, in which he was imitated by his father, and for several minutes nothing was heard but the ticking of the green-faced case-clock against the wall.

'I'm sure,' added Mrs. Smith in a more philosophic tone, and as a terminative speech, 'if there'd been so much trouble to get a husband in my time as there is in these days – when you must make a god-almighty of a man to get en to hae ye – I'd have trod clay for bricks before I'd ever have lowered my dignity to marry, or there's no bread in nine loaves.'

The discussion now dropped, and as it was getting late, Stephen bade his parents farewell for the evening, his mother none the less warmly for their sparring; for although Mrs. Smith and Stephen were always contending, they were never at enmity.

'And possibly,' said Stephen, 'I may leave here altogether to-morrow; I don't know. So that if I shouldn't call again before returning to London, don't be alarmed, will you?'

'But didn't you come for a fortnight?' said his mother. 'And haven't you a month's holiday altogether? They are going to turn you out, then?'

'Not at all. I may stay longer; I may go. If I go, you had better say nothing about my having been here, for her sake. At what time of the morning does the carrier pass Endelstow lane?'

'Seven o'clock.'

And then he left them. His thoughts were, that should the vicar permit him to become engaged, to hope for an engagement, or in any way to think of his beloved Elfride, he might stay longer. Should he be forbidden to think of any such thing, he resolved to go at once. And the latter, even to young hopefulness, seemed the more probable alternative.

Stephen walked back to the vicarage through the meadows, as he had come, surrounded by the soft musical purl of the water through little weirs, the modest light of the moon, the freshening smell of the dews out-spread around. It was a time when mere seeing is meditation, and meditation peace. Stephen was hardly philosopher enough to avail himself of Nature's offer. His constitution was made up of very simple particulars; was one which, rare in the spring-time of civilizations, seems to grow abundant as a nation gets older, individuality fades, and education spreads; that is, his brain had extraordinary receptive powers, and no great creativeness. Quickly acquiring any kind of knowledge he saw around him, and having a plastic adaptability more common in woman than in man, he changed colour like a chameleon as the society he found himself in assumed a higher and more artificial tone. He had not many original ideas, and yet there was scarcely an idea to which, under proper training, he could not have added a respectable co-ordinate.

He saw nothing outside himself to-night; and what he saw within was a weariness to his flesh. Yet to a dispassionate observer, his pretensions to Elfride, though rather premature, were far from absurd as marriages go, unless the accidental proximity of simple but honest parents could be said to make them so.

The clock struck eleven when he entered the house. Elfride had been waiting with scarcely a movement since he departed. Before he had spoken to her she caught sight of him passing into the study with her father. She saw that he had by some means obtained the private interview he desired.

A nervous headache had been growing on the excitable girl during the absence of Stephen, and now she could do nothing beyond going up again to her room as she had done before. Instead of lying down she sat again in the darkness without closing the door, and listened with a beating heart to every sound from downstairs. The servants had gone to bed. She ultimately heard the two men come from the study and cross to the dining-room, where supper had been lingering for more than an hour. The door was left open, and she found that the meal, such as it was, passed off between her father and her lover without any remark, save commonplaces as to cucumbers and melons, their wholesomeness and culture, uttered in a stiff and formal way. It seemed to prefigure failure.

Shortly afterwards Stephen came upstairs to his bedroom, and was almost immediately followed by her father, who also retired for the night. Not inclined to get a light, she partly undressed and sat on the bed, where she remained in pained thought for some time, possibly an hour. Then rising to close her door previously to fully unrobing, she saw a streak of light shining across the landing. Her father's door was shut, and he could be heard snoring regularly. The light came from Stephen's room, and the slight sounds also coming thence emphatically denoted what he was doing. In the perfect silence she could hear the closing of a lid and the clicking of a lock, – he was fastening his hat-box. Then the buckling of straps and the click of another key, – he was securing his portmanteau. With trebled foreboding she opened her door softly, and went towards his. One sensation pervaded her to distraction. Stephen, her handsome youth and darling, was going away, and she might never see him again except in secret and in sadness – perhaps never more. At any rate, she could no longer wait till the morning to hear the result of the interview, as she had intended. She flung her dressing-gown round her, tapped lightly at his door, and whispered 'Stephen!' He came instantly, opened the door, and stepped out.

'Tell me; are we to hope?'

He replied in a disturbed whisper, and a tear approached its outlet, though none fell.

'I am not to think of such a preposterous thing – that's what he said. And I am going to-morrow. I should have called you up to bid you good-bye.'

'But he didn't say you were to go – O Stephen, he didn't say that?'

‘No; not in words. But I cannot stay.’

‘Oh, don’t, don’t go! Do come and let us talk. Let us come down to the drawing-room for a few minutes; he will hear us here.’

She preceded him down the staircase with the taper light in her hand, looking unnaturally tall and thin in the long dove-coloured dressing-gown she wore. She did not stop to think of the propriety or otherwise of this midnight interview under such circumstances. She thought that the tragedy of her life was beginning, and, for the first time almost, felt that her existence might have a grave side, the shade of which enveloped and rendered invisible the delicate gradations of custom and punctilio. Elfride softly opened the drawing-room door and they both went in. When she had placed the candle on the table, he enclosed her with his arms, dried her eyes with his handkerchief, and kissed their lids.

‘Stephen, it is over – happy love is over; and there is no more sunshine now!’

‘I will make a fortune, and come to you, and have you. Yes, I will!’

‘Papa will never hear of it – never – never! You don’t know him. I do. He is either biassed in favour of a thing, or prejudiced against it. Argument is powerless against either feeling.’

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