

The Novels of Thomas Hardy - Volume 1

Thomas Hardy

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THE COMPLETE WORKS OF
THOMAS HARDY
(1840-1928)

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THE COMPLETE WORKS OF
THOMAS HARDY

The Novels

Thomas Hardy's birthplace, Higher Bockhampton, Dorset

Thomas Hardy's parents — his father Thomas was a successful stonemason and his mother Jemima was well-educated.

THE POOR MAN AND THE LADY

This was the title of Hardy's very first novel, written in 1867 and never published. After the manuscript had been rejected by several publishers, Hardy gave up his attempts to sell the novel in its original form. Nevertheless, he used some of the novel's scenes and themes in later works, particularly in the poem "The Poor Man and the Lady" and in the novella *An Indiscretion in the Life of an Heiress* (1878).

Sadly, the manuscript no longer exists. Hardy destroyed the last surviving fragment in his last years, after giving up an attempt of rewriting the novel.

Here is the surviving poem based on the lost novel:

AN EXPOSTULATION

The Poor Man and the Lady

Why want to go afar

Where pitfalls are,

When all we swains adore

Your featness more and more

As heroine of our artless masquings here,

And count few Wessex' daughters half so dear?

Why paint your appealing face,

When its born grace

Is such no skill can match

With powder, puff, or patch,

Whose every touch defames your bloomfulness,

And with each stain increases our distress?

Yea, is it not enough

That (rare or rough

Your lines here) all uphold you,

And as with wings enfold you,

But you must needs desert the kine-cropt vale

Wherein your foredames gaily filled the pail?

Here is the novella influenced by Hardy's first novel:

AN INDISCRETION IN THE LIFE OF AN HEIRESS

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Hardy in 1856, aged 16

CHAPTER I.

When I would pray and think, I think and pray
To several subjects: heaven hath my empty words;
Whilst my invention, hearing not my tongue,
Anchors on Isabel.

The congregation in Tollamore church were singing the evening hymn, the people gently swaying backwards and forwards like trees in a soft breeze. The heads of the

village children, who sat in the gallery, were inclined to one side as they uttered their shrill notes, their eyes listlessly tracing some crack in the old walls, or following the movement of a distant bough or bird, with features rapt almost to painfulness.

In front of the children stood a thoughtful young man, who, was plainly enough the schoolmaster; and his gaze was fixed on a remote part of the aisle beneath him. When the singing was over, and all had sat down for the sermon, his eyes still remained in the same place. There was some excuse for their direction, for it was in a straight line forwards; but their fixity was only to be explained by some object before them, This was a square pew, containing one solitary sitter. But that sitter was a young lady, and a very sweet lady was she.

Afternoon service in Tollamore parish was later than in many others in that neighbourhood; and as the darkness deepened during the progress of the sermon, the rector's pulpit candles shone to the remotest nooks of the building, till at length they became the sole lights of the congregation. The lady was the single person besides the preacher whose face was turned westwards, the pew that she occupied being the only one in the church in which the seat ran all round. She reclined in her corner, her bonnet and dark dress growing by degrees invisible, and at last only her upturned face could be discerned, a solitary white spot against the black surface of the wainscot. Over her head rose a vast marble monument, erected to the memory of her ancestors, male and female; for she was one of high standing in that parish. The design consisted of a winged skull and two cherubim, supporting a pair of tall Corinthian columns, between which spread a broad slab, containing the roll of ancient names, lineages, and deeds, and surmounted by a pediment, with the crest of the family at its apex.

As the youthful schoolmaster gazed, and all these details became dimmer, her face was modified in his fancy, till it seemed almost to resemble the carved marble skull immediately above her head. The thought was unpleasant enough to arouse him from his half-dreamy state, and he entered on rational considerations of what a vast gulf lay between that lady and himself, what a troublesome world it was to live in where such divisions could exist, and how painful was the evil when a man of his unequal history was possessed of a keen susceptibility.

Now a close observer, who should have happened to be near the large pew, might have noticed before the light got low that the interested gaze of the young man had been returned from time to time by the young lady, although he, towards whom her glances were directed, did not perceive the fact. It would have been guessed, that something in the past was common to both, notwithstanding their difference in social standing. What that was may be related in a few words.

One day in the previous week there had been some excitement in the parish on account of the introduction upon the farm of a steam threshing-machine for the first time, the date of these events being some thirty years ago. The machine had been hired by a farmer who was a relative of the schoolmaster's, and when it was set going all the people round about came to see it work. It was fixed in a corner of a field near the main road, and in the afternoon a passing carriage stopped outside the hedge. The

steps were let down, and Miss Geraldine Allenville, the young woman whom we have seen sitting in the church pew, came through the gate of the field towards the engine. At that hour most of the villagers had been to the spot, had gratified their curiosity, and afterwards gone home again; so that there were only now left standing beside the engine the engine-man, the farmer, and the young schoolmaster, who had come like the rest. The labourers were at the other part of the machine, under the cornstack some distance off.

The girl looked with interest at the whizzing wheels, asked questions of the old farmer, and remained in conversation with him for some time, the schoolmaster standing a few paces distant, and looking more or less towards her. Suddenly the expression of his face changed to one of horror; he was by her side in a moment, and, seizing hold of her, he swung her round by the arm to a distance of several feet.

In speaking to the farmer she had inadvertently stepped backwards, and had drawn so near to the band which ran from the engine to the drum of the thresher that in another moment her dress must have been caught, and she would have been whirled round the wheel as a mangled carcass. As soon as the meaning of the young man's act was understood by her she turned deadly pale and nearly fainted. When she was well enough to walk, the two men led her to the carriage, which had been standing outside the hedge all the time.

"You have saved me from a ghastly death!" the agitated girl murmured to the schoolmaster. "Oh! I can never forget it!" and then she sank into the carriage and was driven away.

On account of this the schoolmaster had been invited to Tollamore House to explain the incident to the squire, the young lady's only living parent. Mr. Allenville thanked her preserver, inquired the history of his late father, a painter of good family, but unfortunate and improvident; and finally told his visitor that, if he were fond of study, the library of the house was at his service. Geraldine herself had spoken very impulsively to the young man — almost, indeed, with imprudent warmth — and his tender interest in her during the church service was the result of the sympathy she had shown.

And thus did an emotion, which became this man's sole motive power through many following years, first arise and establish itself. Only once more did she lift her eyes to where he sat, and it was when they all stood up before leaving. This time he noticed the glance. Her look of recognition led his feelings onward yet another stage. Admiration grew to be attachment; he even wished that he might own her, not exactly as a wife, but as a being superior to himself in the sense in which a servant may be said to own a master. He would have cared to possess her in order to exhibit her glories to the world, and he scarcely even thought of her ever loving him.

There were two other stages in his course of love, but they were not reached till some time after to-day. The first was a change from this proud desire to a longing to cherish. The last stage, later still, was when her very defects became rallying-points for defence, when every one of his senses became special pleaders for her; and that not

through blindness, but from a tender inability to do aught else than defend her against all the world.

CHAPTER II.

She was active, stirring, all fire —
Could not rest, could not tire —
Never in all the world such an one!
And here was plenty to be done,
And she that could do it, great or small,
She was to do nothing at all.

Five mornings later the same young man was looking out of the window of Tollamore village school in a fixed and absent manner. The weather was exceptionally mild, though scarcely to the degree which would have justified his airy situation at such a month of the year. A hazy light spread through the air, the landscape on which his eyes were resting being enlivened and lit up by the spirit of an unseen sun rather than by its direct rays. Every sound could be heard for miles. There was a great crowing of cocks, bleating of sheep, and cawing of rooks, which proceeded from all points of the compass, rising and falling as the origin of each sound was near or far away. There were also audible the voices of people in the village, interspersed with hearty laughs, the bell of a distant flock of sheep, a robin close at hand, vehicles in the neighbouring roads and lanes. One of these latter noises grew gradually more distinct, and proved itself to be rapidly nearing the school. The listener blushed as he heard it.

“Suppose it should be!” he said to himself.

He had said the same thing at every such noise that he had heard during the foregoing week, and had been mistaken in his hope. But this time a certain carriage did appear in answer to his expectation. He came from the window hastily; and in a minute a footman knocked and opened the school door.

“Miss Allenville wishes to speak to you, Mr. Mayne.”

The schoolmaster went to the porch — he was a very young man to be called a schoolmaster — his heart beating with excitement.

“Good morning,” she said, with a confident yet girlish smile. “My father expects me to inquire into the school arrangements, and I wish to do so on my own account as well. May I come in?”

She entered as she spoke, telling the coachman to drive to the village on some errand, and call for her in half an hour.

Mayne could have wished that she had not been so thoroughly free from all apparent consciousness of the event of the previous week, of the fact that he was considerably more of a man than the small persons by whom the apartment was mainly filled, and that he was as nearly as possible at her own level in age, as wide in sympathies, and possibly more inflammable in heart. But he soon found that a sort of fear to entrust

her voice with the subject of that link between them was what restrained her. When he had explained a few details of routine she moved away from him round the school.

He turned and looked at her as she stood among the children. To his eyes her beauty was indescribable. Before he had met her he had scarcely believed that any woman in the world could be so lovely. The clear, deep eyes, full of all tender expressions; the fresh, subtly-curved cheek, changing its tones of red with the fluctuation of each thought; the ripe tint of her delicate mouth, and the indefinable line where lip met lip; the noble bend of her neck, the wavy lengths of her dark brown hair, the soft motions of her bosom when she breathed, the light fall of her little feet, the elegant contrivances of her attire, all struck him as something he had dreamed of and was not actually seeing. Geraldine Allenville was, in truth, very beautiful; she was a girl such as his eyes had never elsewhere beheld; and her presence here before his face kept up a sharp struggle of sweet and bitter within him.

He had thought at first that the flush on her face was caused by the fresh air of the morning; but, as it quickly changed to a lesser hue, it occurred to Mayne that it might after all have arisen from shyness at meeting him after her narrow escape. Be that as it might, their conversation, which at first consisted of bald sentences, divided by wide intervals of time, became more frequent, and at last continuous. He was painfully soon convinced that her tongue would never have run so easily as it did had it not been that she thought him a person on whom she could vent her ideas without reflection or punctiliousness — a thought, perhaps, expressed to herself by such words as, “I will say what I like to him, for he is only our schoolmaster.”

“And you have chosen to keep a school,” she went on, with a shade of mischievousness in her tone, looking at him as if she thought that, had she been a man capable of saving people’s lives, she would have done something much better than teaching. She was so young as to habitually think thus of other persons’ courses.

“No,” he said simply; “I don’t choose to keep a school in the sense you mean, choosing it from a host of pursuits, all equally possible.”

“How came you here, then?”

“I fear more by chance than by aim.”

“Then you are not very ambitious?”

“I have my ambitions, such as they are.”

“I thought so. Everybody has nowadays. But it is a better thing not to be too ambitious, I think.”

“If we value ease of mind, and take an economist’s view of our term of life, it may be a better thing.”

Having been tempted, by his unexpectedly cultivated manner of speaking, to say more than she had meant to say, she found it embarrassing either to break off or to say more, and in her doubt she stooped to kiss a little girl.

“Although I spoke lightly of ambition,” she observed, without turning to him, “and said that easy happiness was worth most, I could defend ambition very well, and in the only pleasant way.”

“And that way?”

“On the broad ground of the loveliness of any dream about future triumphs. In looking back there is a pleasure in contemplating a time when some attractive thing of the future appeared possible, even though it never came to pass.”

Mayne was puzzled to hear her talk in this tone of maturity. That such questions of success and failure should have occupied his own mind seemed natural, for they had been forced upon him by the difficulties he had encountered in his pursuit of a career. He was not just then aware how very unpractical the knowledge of this sage lady of seventeen really was; that it was merely caught up by intercommunication with people of culture and experience, who talked before her of their theories and beliefs till she insensibly acquired their tongue.

The carriage was heard coming up the road. Mayne gave her the list of the children, their ages, and other particulars which she had called for, and she turned to go out. Not a word had been said about the incident by the threshing-machine, though each one could see that it was constantly in the other's thoughts. The roll of the wheels may or may not have reminded her of her position in relation to him. She said, bowing, and in a somewhat more distant tone: “We shall all be glad to learn that our schoolmaster is so — nice; such a philosopher.” But, rather surprised at her own cruelty in uttering the latter words, she added one of the sweetest laughs that ever came from lips, and said, in gentlest tones, “Good morning; I shall always remember what you did for me. Oh! it makes me sick to think of that moment. I came on purpose to thank you again, but I could not say it till now!

Mayne's heart, which had felt the rebuff, came round to her with a rush; he could have almost forgiven her for physically wounding him if she had asked him in such a tone not to notice it. He watched her out of sight, thin king in rather a melancholy mood how time would absorb all her beauty, as the growing distance between them absorbed her form. He then went in, and endeavoured to recall every word that he had said to her, troubling and racking his mind to the utmost of his ability about his imagined faults of manner. He remembered that he had used the indicative mood instead of the proper subjective in a certain phrase. He had given her to understand that an old idea he had made use of was his own, and so on through other particulars, each of which was an item of misery.

The place and the manner of her sitting were defined by the position of her chair, and by the books, maps, and prints scattered round it. Her “I shall always remember,” he repeated to himself, aye, a hundred times; and though he knew the plain import of the words, he could not help toying with them, looking at them from all points, and investing them with extraordinary meanings.

CHAPTER III.

But what is this? I turn about.

And find a trouble in thine eye.

Egbert Mayne, though at present filling the office of village schoolmaster, had been intended for a less narrow path. His position at this time was entirely owing to the death of his father in embarrassed circumstances two years before. Mr. Mayne had been a landscape and animal painter, and had settled in the village in early manhood, where he set about improving his prospects by marrying a small farmer's daughter. The son had been sent away from home at an early age to a good school, and had returned at seventeen to enter upon some professional life or other. But his father's health was at this time declining, and when the painter died, a year and a half later, nothing had been done for Egbert. He was now living with his maternal grandfather, Richard Broadford, the farmer, who was a tenant of Squire Allenville's. Egbert's ideas did not incline to painting, but he had ambitious notions of adopting a literary profession, or entering the Church, or doing something congenial to his tastes whenever he could set about it. But first it was necessary to read, mark, learn, and look around him; and, a master being temporarily required for the school until such time as it should be placed under government inspection, he stepped in and made use of the occupation as a stop-gap for a while.

He lived in his grandfather's farmhouse, walking backwards and forwards to the school every day, in order that the old man, who would otherwise be living quite alone, might have the benefit of his society during the long winter evenings. Egbert was much attached to his grandfather, and so, indeed, were all who knew him. The old farmer's amiable disposition and kindness of heart, while they had hindered him from enriching himself one shilling during the course of a long and laborious life, had also kept him clear of every arrow of antagonism. The house in which he lived was the same that he had been born in, and was almost a part of himself. It had been built by his father's father; but on the dropping of the lives for which it was held, some twenty years earlier, it had lapsed to the Squire.

Richard Broadford was not, however, dispossessed: after his father's death the family had continued as before in the house and farm, but as yearly tenants. It was much to Broadford's delight, for his pain at the thought of parting from those old sticks and stones of his ancestors, before it had been known if the tenure could be continued, was real and great.

On the evening of the day on which Miss Allenville called at the school Egbert returned to the farmhouse as usual. He found his grandfather sitting with his hands on his knees, and showing by his countenance that something had happened to disturb him greatly. Egbert looked at him inquiringly, and with some misgiving.

"I have got to go at last, Egbert," he said, in a tone intended to be stoical, but far from it. "He is my enemy after all."

"Who?" said Mayne.

"The squire. He's going to take seventy acres of neighbour Greenman's farm to enlarge the park; and Greenman's acreage is to be made up to him, and more, by

throwing my farm in with his. Yes, that's what the squire is going to have done. . . . Well, I thought to have died here; but 'tisn't to be."

He looked as helpless as a child, for age had weakened him. Egbert endeavoured to cheer him a little, and vexed as the young man was, he thought there might yet be some means of tiding over this difficulty. "Mr. Allenville wants seventy acres more in his park, does he?" he echoed mechanically. "Why can't it be taken entirely out of Greenman's farm? His is big enough, Heaven knows; and your hundred acres might be left you in peace."

"Well mayest say so! Oh, it is because he is tired .of seeing old-fashioned farming like mine. - He likes the young generation's system best, I suppose."

"If I had only known this this afternoon!" Egbert said.

"You could have done nothing."

"Perhaps not." Egbert was, however, thinking that he would have mentioned the matter to his visitor, and told her such circumstances as would have enlisted her sympathies in the case.

"I thought it would come to this," said old Richard vehemently. "The present Squire Allenville has never been any real friend to me. It was only through his wife that I have stayed here so long. If it hadn't been for her, we should have gone the very year that my poor father died, and the house fell into hand. I wish we had now. You see, now she's dead, there's nobody to counteract him in his schemes; and so I am to be swept away."

They talked on thus, and by bedtime the old man was in better spirits. But the subject did not cease to occupy Egbert's mind, and that anxiously. Were the house and farm which his grandfather had occupied so long to be taken away, Egbert knew it would affect his life to a degree out of all proportion to the seriousness of the event. The transplanting of old people is like the transplanting of old trees; a twelvemonth usually sees them wither and die away.

The next day proved that his anticipations were likely to be correct, his grandfather being so disturbed that he could scarcely eat or drink. The remainder of the week passed in just the same way. Nothing now occupied Egbert's mind but a longing to see Miss Allenville. To see her would be bliss; to ask her if anything could be done by which his grandfather might retain the farm and premises would be nothing but duty. His hope of good results from the course was based on the knowledge that Allenville, cold and hard as he was, had some considerable affection for or pride in his daughter, and that thus she might influence him.

It was not likely that she would call at the school for a week or two at least, and Mayne therefore tried to meet with her elsewhere. One morning early he was returning from the remote hamlet of Hawksgate, on the further side of the parish, and the nearest way to the school was across the park. He read as he walked, as was customary with him, though at present his thoughts wandered incessantly. The path took him through a shrubbery running close up to a remote wing of the mansion. Nobody seemed to be

stirring in that quarter, till, turning an angle, he saw Geraldia's own graceful figure close at hand, robed in fur, and standing at ease outside an open French casement.

She was startled by his sudden appearance, but her face soon betrayed a sympathetic remembrance of him. Egbert scarcely knew whether to stop or to walk on, when, casting her eyes upon his book, she said, "Don't let me interrupt your reading."

"I am glad to have —" he stammered, and for the moment could get no farther. His nervousness encouraged her to continue. "What are you reading?" she said.

The book was, as may possibly be supposed by those who know the mood inspired by hopeless attachments, "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage," a poem which at that date had never been surpassed in congeniality to the minds of young persons in the full fever of virulent love. He was rather reluctant to let her know this but as the inquiry afforded him an opening for conversation he held out the book, and her eye glanced over the page.

"Oh, thank you," she said hastily, "I ought not to have asked that — only I am interested always in books. Is your grand father quite well, Mr. Mayne? I saw him yesterday, and thought he seemed to be not in such good health as usual."

"His mind is disturbed," said Egbert.

"Indeed, why is that?"

"It is on account of his having to leave the farm. He is old, and was born in that house."

"Ah, yes, I have heard something of that," she said with a slightly regretful look. "Mr. Allenville has decided to enlarge the park. Born in the house, was he?"

"Yes. His father built it. May I ask your opinion on the point, Miss Allenville? Don't you think it would be possible to enlarge the park without taking my grandfather's farm? Greenman has already five hundred acres."

She was perplexed how to reply, and evading the question said; "Your grandfather much wishes to stay?"

"He does, intensely — more than you can believe or think. But he will not ask to be let remain. I dread the effect of leaving upon him. If it were possible to contrive that he should not be turned out I should be grateful indeed."

"I — I will do all I can that things may remain as they are," she said with a deepened colour. "In fact, I am almost certain that he will not have to go, since it is so painful to him," she added in the sanguine tones of a child. "My father could not have known that his mind was so bent on staying."

Here the conversation ended, and Egbert went on with a lightened heart. Whether his pleasure arose entirely from having done his grandfather a good turn or from the mere sensation of having been near her, he himself could hardly have determined.

CHAPTER IV.

Oh, for my sake, do you with fortune chide

The guilty goddess of my harmful deed,
That did not better for my life provide.

Now commenced a period during which Egbert Mayne's emotions burnt in a more unreasoning and wilder worship than at any other time in his life. The great condition of idealization in love was present here, that of an association in which, through difference in rank, the petty human elements that enter so largely into life are kept entirely out of sight, and there is hardly awakened in the man's mind a thought that they appertain to her at all.

He deviated frequently from his daily track to the spot where the last meeting had been, till, on the fourth morning after, he saw her there again; but she let him pass that time with a bare recognition. Two days later the carriage drove down the lane to the village as he was walking away. When they met she told the coachman to stop.

"I am glad to tell you that your grandfather may be perfectly easy about the house and farm," she said; as if she took unfeigned pleasure in saying it. "The question of altering the park is postponed indefinitely. I have resisted it: I could do no less for one who did so much for me."

"Thank you very warmly," said Egbert so earnestly that she blushed crimson as the carriage rolled away.

The spring drew on, and he saw and spoke with her several times. In truth he walked abroad much more than had been usual with him formerly, searching in all directions for her form. Had she not been unreflecting and impressionable — had not her life dragged on as uneventfully as that of one in gaol, through her residing in a great house with no companion but an undemonstrative father; and, above all, had not Egbert been a singularly engaging young man of that distracting order of beauty which, grows upon the feminine gazer with every glance, this tender waylaying would have made little difference to anybody. But such was not the case. In return for Egbert's presence of mind at the threshing she had done him a kindness, and the pleasure that she took in the act shed an added interest upon the object of it. Thus, on both sides it had happened that a deed of solicitude casually performed gave each doer a sense of proprietorship in its recipient, and a wish still further to establish that position by other deeds of the same sort.

To still further kindle Geraldine's indiscreet interest in him, Egbert's devotion became perceptible ere long even to her inexperienced eyes; and it was like a new world to the young girl. At first she was almost frightened at the novelty of the thing. Then the fascination of the discovery caused her ready, receptive heart to palpitate in an ungovernable manner whenever he came near her. She was not quite in love herself, but she was so moved by the circumstance of her deliverer being in love, that she could think of nothing else. His appearing at odd places startled her; and yet she rather liked that kind of startling. Too often her eyes rested on his face; too often her thoughts surrounded his figure and dwelt on his conversation.

One day when they met on a bridge, they did not part till after a long and interesting conversation on books, in which many opinions of Mayne's (crude and unformed

enough, it must be owned) that happened to take her fancy, set her glowing with ardour to unfold her own.

After any such meeting as this, Egbert would go home and think for hours of her little remarks and movements. The day and minute of every accidental rencounter became registered in his mind with the indelibility of ink. Years afterwards he could recall at a moment's notice that he saw her at eleven o'clock on the third of April, a Sunday; at four on Tuesday, the twelfth; at a quarter to six on Thursday the twenty-eighth; that on the ninth it rained at a quarter past two, when she was walking up the avenue; that on the seventeenth the grass was rather too wet for a lady's feet; and other calendrical and meteorological facts of no value whatever either to science or history.

On a Tuesday evening, when they had had several conversations out of doors, and when a passionate liking for his society was creeping over the reckless though pure girl, slowly, insidiously, and surely, like ripeness over fruit, she further committed herself by coming alone to the school. A heavy rain had threatened to fall all the afternoon, and just as she entered it began. School hours were at that moment over, but he waited a few moments before dismissing the children, to see if the storm would clear up. After looking round at the classes, and making sundry inquiries of the little ones in the usual manner of ladies who patronize a school, she came up to him.

"I listened outside before I came in. It was a great pleasure to hear the voices — three classes reading at three paces." She continued with a laugh: "There was a rough treble voice bowling easily along, an ambling sweet voice earnest about fishes in the sea, and a shrill voice spelling out letter by letter. Then there was a shuffling of feet — then you sang. It seemed quite a little poem."

"Yes," Egbert said. "But perhaps, like many poems, it was hard prose to the originators."

She remained thinking, and Mayne looked out at the weather. Judging from the sky and wind that there was no likelihood of a change that night, he proceeded to let the children go. Miss Allenville assisted in wrapping up as many of them as possible in the old coats and other apparel which Egbert kept by him for the purpose. But she touched both clothes and children rather gingerly, and as if she did not much like the contact.

Egbert's sentiments towards her that evening were vehement and curious. Much as he loved her, his liking for the peasantry about him — his mother's ancestry — caused him sometimes a twinge of self-reproach for thinking of her so exclusively, and nearly forgetting all his old acquaintance, neighbours, and his grandfather's familiar friends, with their rough but honest ways. To further complicate his feelings to-night there was the sight, on the one hand, of the young lady with her warm rich dress and glowing future, and on the other of the weak little boys and girls — some only five years old, and none more than twelve, going off in their different directions in the pelting rain, some for a walk of more than two miles, with the certainty of being drenched to the skin, and with no change of clothes when they reached their home. He watched the

rain-spots thickening upon the faded frocks, worn-out tippets, yellow straw hats and bonnets, and coarse pinafores of his unprotected little flock as they walked down the path, and was thereby reminded of the hopelessness of his attachment, by perceiving how much more nearly akin was his lot to theirs than to hers.

Miss Allenville, too, was looking at the children, and unfortunately she chanced to say, as they toddled off, "Poor little wretches!"

A sort of despairing irritation at her remoteness from his plane, as implied by her pitying the children so unmercifully, impelled him to remark, "Say poor little children, madam." She was silent — awkwardly silent.

"I suppose I must walk home," she said, when about half a minute had passed. "Nobody knows where I am, and the carriage may not find me for hours."

"I'll go for the carriage," said Egbert readily.

But he did not move. While she had been speaking, there had grown up in him a conviction that these opportunities of seeing her would soon necessarily cease. She would get older, and would perceive the incorrectness of being on intimate terms with him merely because he had snatched her from danger. He would have to engage in a more active career, and go away. Such ideas brought on an irresistible climax to an intense and long felt desire. He had just reached that point in the action of passion upon mind at which it masters judgment.

It was almost dark in the room, by reason of the heavy clouds and the nearness of the night. But the fire had just flamed up brightly in the grate, and it threw her face and form into ruddy relief against the grey wall behind.

Suddenly rushing towards her, he seized her hand before she comprehended his intention, kissed it tenderly, and clasped her in his arms. Her soft body yielded like wool under his embrace. As suddenly releasing her he turned, and went back to the other end of the room.

Egbert's feeling as he retired was that he had committed a crime. The madness of the action was apparent to him almost before it was completed. There seemed not a single thing left for him to do, but to go into lifelong banishment for such sacrilege. He faced round and regarded her. Her features were not visible enough to judge of their expression. All that he could discern through the dimness and his own agitation was that for some time she remained quite motionless. Her state was probably one of suspension as with Ulysses before Melanthus, she may have

entertained a breast

That in the strife of all extremes did rest.

In one, two, or five minutes — neither of them ever knew exactly how long — apparently without the motion of a limb, she glided noiselessly to the door and vanished.

Egbert leant himself against the wall, almost distracted. He could see absolutely no limit to the harm that he had done by his wild and unreasoning folly. "Am I a man to thus ill-treat the loveliest girl that ever was born? Sweet injured creature — how she will hate me!" These were some of the expressions that he murmured in the twilight of that lonely room.

Then he said that she certainly had encouraged him, which, unfortunately for her, was only too true. She had seen that he was always in search of her, and she did not put herself out of his way. He was sure that she liked him to admire her. "Yet, no," he murmured, "I will not excuse myself at all."

The night passed away miserably. One conviction by degrees overruled all the rest in his mind — that if she knew precisely how pure had been his longing towards her, she could not think badly of him. His reflections resulted in a resolve to get an interview with her, and make his defence and explanation in full. The decision come to, his impatience could scarcely preserve him from rushing to Tollamore House that very daybreak, and trying to get into her presence, though it was the likeliest of suppositions that she would never see him.

Every spare minute of the following days he hovered round the house, in hope of getting a glimpse of her; but not once did she make herself visible. He delayed taking the extreme step of calling, till the hour came when he could delay no longer. On a certain day he rang the bell with a mild air, and disguised his feelings by looking as if he wished to speak to her merely on copy-books, slates, and other school matters, the school being professedly her hobby. He was told that Miss Allenville had gone on a visit to some relatives thirty-five miles off, and that she would probably not return for a month.

As there was no help for it, Egbert settled down to wait as he best could, not without many misgivings lest his rash action, which a prompt explanation might have toned down and excused, would now be the cause of a total estrangement between them, so that nothing would restore him to the place he had formerly held in her estimation. That she had ever seriously loved him he did not hope or dream; but it was intense pain to him to be out of her favour.

CHAPTER V.

So I soberly laid my last plan
To extinguish the man,
Round his creep-hole, with never a break
Ran my fires for his sake;
Over head did my thunder combine
With my underground mine:
Till I looked from my labour content
To enjoy the event.
When sudden — how think ye the end?

A week after the crisis mentioned above, it was secretly whispered to Egbert's grandfather that the park enlargement scheme was after all to be proceeded with; that Miss Allenville was extremely anxious to have it put in hand as soon as possible.

Farmer Broadford's farm was to be added to Greenman's, as originally intended, and the old house that Broadford lived in was to be pulled down as an encumbrance.

"It is she this time!" murmured Egbert gloomily. "Then I did offend her, and mortify her; and she is resentful."

The excitement of his grandfather again caused him much alarm, and even remorse. Such was the responsiveness of the farmer's physical to his mental state that in the course of a week his usual health failed, and his gloominess of mind was followed by dimness of sight and giddiness. By much persuasion Egbert induced him to stay at home for a day or two; but indoors he was the most restless of creatures, through not being able to engage in the pursuits to which he had been accustomed from his boyhood. He walked up and down, looking wistfully out of the window, shifting the positions of books and chairs, and putting them back again, opening his desk and shutting it after a vacant look at the papers, saying he should never get settled in another farm at his time of life, and evincing all the symptoms of nervousness and excitability.

Meanwhile Egbert anxiously awaited Miss Allenville's return, more resolved than ever to obtain audience of her, and beg her not to visit upon an unoffending old man the consequences of a young one's folly. Any retaliation upon himself he would accept willingly, and own to be well deserved.

At length, by making off-hand inquiries (for he dared not ask directly for her again) he learnt that she was to be at home on the Thursday. The following Friday and Saturday he kept a sharp look-out; and, when lingering in the park for at least the tenth time in that half-week, a sudden rise in the ground revealed her coming along a path

Egbert stayed his advance, in order that, if she really objected to see him, she might easily strike off into a side path or turn back.

She did not accept the alternatives, but came straight on to where he lingered, averting her face waywardly as she approached. When she was within a few steps of him he could see that the trimmings of her dress trembled like leaves. He cleared his dry throat to speak.

"Miss Allenville," he said, humbly taking off his hat, "I should be glad to say one word to you, if I may."

She looked at him for just one moment, but said nothing; and he could see that the expression of her face was flushed, and her mood skittish. The place they were standing in was a remote nook, hidden by the trunks and boughs, so that he could afford to give her plenty of time, for there was no fear of their being observed or overheard. Indeed, knowing that she often walked that way, Egbert had previously surveyed the spot and thought it suitable for the occasion, much as Wellington antecedently surveyed the field of Waterloo.

Here the young man began his pleading speech to her. He dilated upon his sensations when first he saw her; and as he became warmed by his oratory he spoke of all his inmost perturbations on her account without the slightest reserve. He related with

much natural eloquence how he had tried over and over again not to love her, and how he had loved her in spite of that trying; of his intention never to reveal his passion, till their situation on that rainy evening prompted the impulse which ended in that irreverent action of his; and earnestly asked her to forgive him — not for his feelings, since they were his own to commend or blame — but for the way in which he testified of them to one so cultivated and so beautiful.

Egbert was flushed and excited by the time that he reached this point in his tale.

Her eyes were fixed on the grass; and then a tear stole quietly from its corner, and wandered down her cheek. She tried to say something, but her usually adroit tongue was unequal to the task. Ultimately she glanced at him, and murmured, "I forgive you;" but so inaudibly, that he only recognized the words by their shape upon her lips.

She looked not much more than a child now, and Egbert thought with sadness that her tear and her words were perhaps but the result, the one of a transitory sympathy, the other of a desire to escape. They stood silent for some seconds, and the dressing-bell of the house began ringing. Turning slowly away without another word she hastened out of his sight.

When Egbert reached home some of his grandfather's old friends were gathered there, sympathizing with him on the removal he would have to submit to if report spoke truly. Their sympathy was rather more for him to bear than their indifference; and as Egbert looked at the old man's bent figure, and at the expression of his face, denoting a wish to sink under the earth, out of sight and out of trouble, he was greatly depressed, and he said inwardly, "What a fool I was to ask forgiveness of a woman who can torture my only relative like this! Why do I feel her to be glorious? Oh that I had never seen her!"

The next day was Sunday, and his grandfather being too unwell to go out, Egbert went to the evening, service alone. When it was over, the rector detained him in the churchyard to say a few words about the next week's undertakings. This was soon done, and Egbert turned back to leave the now empty churchyard. Passing the porch he saw Miss Allenville coming out of the door.

Egbert said nothing, for he knew not what to say; but she spoke. "Ah, Mr. Mayne, how beautiful the west sky looks! It is the finest sunset we have had this spring."

"It is very beautiful," he replied, without looking westward a single degree. "Miss Allenville," he said reproachfully, "you might just have thought whether, for the sake of reaching one guilty person, it was worth while to deeply wound an old man."

"I do not allow you to say that," she answered with proud quickness. "Still, I will listen just this once."

"Are you glad you asserted your superiority to me by putting in motion again that scheme for turning him out?"

"I merely left off hindering it," she said.

"Well, we shall go now," continued Egbert, "and make room for newer people. I hope you forgive what caused it all."

“You talk in that strain to make me feel regrets; and you think that because you are read in a few books you may say or do anything.”

“No, no. That’s unfair.”

“I will try to alter it — that your grandfather may not leave. Say that you forgive me for thinking he and yourself had better leave — as I forgive you for what you did. But remember, nothing of that sort ever again.”

“Forgive you? Oh, Miss Allenville!” said he in a wild whisper, “I wish you had sinned a hundred times as much, that I might show how readily I can forgive all.”

She had looked as if she would have held out her hand; but, for some reason or other, directly he had spoken with emotion it was not so well for him as when he had spoken to wound her. She passed on silently, and entered the private gate to the house.

A day or two after this, about three o’clock in the afternoon, and whilst Egbert was giving a lesson in geography, a lad burst into the school with the tidings that Farmer Broadford had fallen from a cornstack they were threshing, and hurt himself severely.

The boy had borrowed a horse to come with, and Mayne at once made him gallop off with it for a doctor. Dismissing the children, the young man ran home full of forebodings. He found his relative in a chair, held up by two of his labouring men. He was put to bed, and seeing how pale he was, Egbert gave him a little wine, and bathed the parts which had been bruised by the fall.

Egbert had at first been the more troubled at the event through believing that his grandfather’s fall was the result of his low spirits and mental uneasiness; and he blamed himself for letting so infirm a man go out upon the farm till quite recovered. But it turned out that the actual cause of the accident was the breaking of the ladder that he had been standing on. When the surgeon had seen him he said that the external bruises were mere trifles; but that the shock had been great, and had produced internal injuries highly dangerous to a man in that stage of life.

His grandson was of opinion in later years that the fall only hastened by a few months a dissolution which would soon have taken place under any circumstances, from the natural decay of the old man’s constitution. His pulse grew feeble and his voice weak, but he continued in a comparatively firm state of mind for some days, during which he talked to Egbert a great deal.

Egbert trusted that the illness would soon pass away; his anxiety for his grandfather was great. When he was gone not one of the family would be left but himself. But in spite of hope the younger man perceived that death was really at hand. And now arose a question. It was certainly a time to make confidences, if they were ever to be made; should he, then, tell his grandfather, who knew the Allenvilles so well, of his love for Geraldine? At one moment it seemed duty; at another it seemed a graceful act, to say the least.

Yet Egbert might never have uttered a word but for a remark of his grandfather’s which led up to the very point. He was speaking of the farm and of the squire, and thence he went on to the daughter.

"She, too," he said, "seems to have that reckless spirit which was in her mother's family, and ruined her mother's father at the gaming-table, though she's too young to show much of it yet."

"I hope not," said Egbert fervently.

"Why? What be the Allenvilles to you — not that I wish the girl harm?"

"I think she is the very best being in the world. I — love her deeply."

His grandfather's eyes were set on the wall. "Well, well, my poor boy," came softly from his mouth. "What made ye think of loving her? Ye may as well love a mountain, for any return you'll 'ever get. Do she know of it?"

"She guesses it. It was my saving her from the threshing-machine that began it."

"And she checks you? "

"Well — no."

"Egbert," he said after a silence, "I am grieved, for it can but end in pain. Mind, she's an inexperienced girl. She never thinks of what trouble she may get herself into with her father and with her friends. And mind this, my lad, as another reason for dropping it; however honourable your love may be, you'll never get credit for your honour. Nothing you can do will ever root out the notion of people that where the man is poor and the woman is high-born he's a scamp and she's an angel."

"She's very good."

"She's thoughtless, or she'd never encourage you. You must try not to see her."

"I will never put myself in her way again."

The subject was mentioned no more then. The next day the worn-out old farmer died, and his last request to Egbert was that he would do nothing to tempt Geraldine Allenville to think of him further.

CHAPTER VI.

Hath misery made thee blind
To the fond workings of a woman's mind?
And must I say — albeit my heart rebel
With all that woman feels but should not tell;
Because, despite thy faults, that heart is moved —
It feared thee, thank'd thee, pitied, maddend, loved?

It was in the evening of the day after Farmer Broadford's death that Egbert first sat down in the house alone. The bandy-legged little man who had acted as his grandfather's groom of the chambers and stables simultaneously had gone into the village. The candles were not yet lighted, and Mayne abstractedly watched upon the pale wall the latter rays of sunset slowly changing into the white shine of a moon a few days old. The ancient family clock had stopped for want of winding, and the intense silence that prevailed seemed more like the bodily presence of some quality than the mere absence of sound.

He was thinking how many were the indifferent expressions which he had used towards the poor body lying cold up-stairs — the only relation he had latterly had upon earth — which might as well have been left unsaid; of how far he had been from practically attempting to do what in theory he called best — to make the most of every pulse of natural affection; that he had never heeded or particularly inquired the meaning of the different pieces of advice which the kind old man had tendered from time to time; that he had never even thought of asking for any details of his grandfather's history.

His musings turned upon Geraldine. He had promised to seek her no more, and he would keep his promise. Her interest in him might only be that of an exceedingly romantic and freakish soul, awakened but through "lack of other idleness," and because sound sense suggested to her that it was a thing dangerous to do; for it seemed that she was ever and only moved by the superior of two antagonistic forces. She had as yet seen little or no society, she was only seventeen; and hence it was possible that a week of the town and fashion into which she would soon be initiated might blot out his very existence from her memory.

He was sitting with his back to the window, meditating in this minor key, when a shadow darkened the opposite moonlit wall. Egbert started. There was a gentle tap at the door; and he opened it to behold the well-known form of the lady in his mind.

"Mr. Mayne, are you alone?" she whispered, full of agitation.

"Quite alone, excepting my poor grandfather's body up-stairs," he answered, as agitated as she.

Then out it all came. "I couldn't help coming — I hope — oh, I do so pray - that it was not through me that he died. Was it I, indeed, who killed him? They say it was the effect of the news that he was to leave the farm. I would have done anything to hinder his being turned out had I only reflected! And now he is dead. It was so cruel to an old man like him; and now you have nobody in the world to care for you, have you, Egbert — except me?"

The ice was wholly broken. He took her hand in both his own and began to assure her that her alarm was grounded on nothing whatever. And yet he was almost reluctant to assure her out of so sweet a state. And when he had said over and over again that his grandfather's fall had nothing to do with his mental condition, that the utmost result of her hasty proceeding was a sadness of spirit in him, she still persisted, as is the custom of women, in holding to that most painful possibility as the most likely, simply because it wounded her most. It was a long while before she would be convinced of her own innocence, but he maintained it firmly, and she finally believed.

They sat down together, restraint having quite died out between them. The fine-lady portion of her existence, of which there was never much, was in abeyance, and they spoke and acted simply as a young man and woman who were beset by common troubles, and who had like hopes and fears.

"And you will never blame me again for what I did?" said Egbert.

“I never blamed you much,” she murmured with arch simplicity. “Why should it be wrong for me to be honest with you now, and tell everything you want to know?”

Mayne was silent. That was a difficult question for a conscientious man to answer. Here was he nearly twenty-one years of age, and with some experience of life, while she was a girl nursed up like an exotic, with no real experience; and but little over seventeen — though from the fineness of her figure she looked more womanly than she really was. It plainly had not crossed her young mind that she was on the verge of committing the most horrible social sin — that of loving beneath her, and owning that she so loved. Two years thence she might see the imprudence of her conduct, and blame him for having led her on. Ought he not, then, considering his grandfather’s words, to say that it was wrong for her to be honest; that she should forget him, and fix her mind on matters appertaining to her order? He could not do it — he let her drift sweetly on.

“I think more of you than of anybody in the whole world,” he replied. “And you will allow me to, will you not? — let me always keep you in my heart, and almost worship you?”

“That would be wrong. But you may think of me, if you like to, very much; it will give me great pleasure. I don’t think my father thinks of me at all — or anybody, except you. I said the other day I would never think of you again, but I have done it, a good many times. It is all through being obliged to care for somebody whether you will or no.”

“And you will go on thinking of me?”

“I will do anything to — oblige you.”

Egbert, on the impulse of the moment, bent over her and raised her little hand to his lips. He revered her too much to think of kissing her cheek. She knew this, and was thrilled through with the delight of being adored as one from above the sky.

Up to this day of its existence their affection had been a battle, a species of antagonism wherein his heart and the girl’s had faced each other, and being anxious to do honour to their respective parts. But now it was a truce and a settlement, in which each one took up the other’s utmost weakness, and was careless of concealing his and her own.

Surely, sitting there as they sat then, a more unreasoning condition of mind as to how this unequal conjunction would end never existed. They swam along through the passing moments, not a thought of duty on either side, not a further thought on his but that she was the dayspring of his life, that he would die for her a hundred times; superadded to which was a shapeless uneasiness that she would in some manner slip away from him. The solemnity of the event that had just happened would have shown up to him any ungenerous feeling in strong colours — and he had reason afterwards to examine the epoch narrowly; but it only seemed to demonstrate how instinctive and uncalculating was the love that worked within him.

It was almost time for her to leave. She held up her watch to the moonlight. Five minutes more she would stay; then three minutes, and no longer. "Now I am going," she said. "Do you forgive me entirely?"

"How shall I say 'yes' without assuming that there was something to forgive?"

"Say 'yes.' It is sweeter to fancy I am forgiven than to think I have not sinned."

With this she went to the door. Egbert accompanied her through the wood, and across a portion of the park, till they were about a hundred yards from the house, when he was forced to bid her farewell.

The old man was buried on the following Sunday. During several weeks afterwards Egbert's sole consolation under his loss was in thinking of Geraldine, for they did not meet in private again till some time had elapsed. The ultimate issue of this absorption in her did not concern him at all: it seemed to be in keeping with the system of his existence now that he should have an utterly inscrutable to-morrow.

CHAPTER VII.

Come forward, some great marshal, and organize equality in society.

The month of August came round, and Miss Allenville was to lay the foundation-stone of a tower or beacon which her father was about to erect on the highest hill of his estate, to the memory of his brother, the general. It was arranged that the school children should sing at the ceremony. Accordingly, at the hour fixed, Egbert was on the spot; a crowd of villagers had also arrived, and carriages were visible in the distance, wending their way towards the scene. When they had drawn up alongside and the visitors alighted, the master mason appeared nervous.

"Mr. Mayne," he said to Egbert, "you had better do what's to be done for the lady. I shall speak too loud, or too soft, or handle things wrong. Do you attend upon her, and I'll lower the stone."

Several ladies and gentlemen now gathered round, and presently Miss Allenville stood in position for her office, supported on one side by her father, a hard-featured man of five-and-forty, and some friends who were visiting at the house; and on the other by the school children, who began singing a song in keeping with the occasion. When this was done, Geraldine laid down the sealed bottle with its enclosed memorandum, which had been prepared for the purpose, and taking a trowel from her father's hand, dabbled confusedly in the mortar, accidentally smearing it over the handle of the trowel.

"Lower the stone," said Egbert, who stood close by, to the mason at the winch; and the stone began to descend.

The dainty-handed young woman was looking as if she would give anything to be relieved of the dirty trowel; but Egbert, the only one who observed this, was guiding

the stone with both hands into its place, and could not receive the tool of her. Every moment increased her perplexity.

“Take it, take it, will you?” she impatiently whispered to him, blushing with a consciousness that people began to perceive her awkward handling.

“I must just finish this first,” he said.

She was resigned in an instant. The stone settled down upon its base, when Egbert at once took the trowel, and her father came up and wiped her glove. Egbert then handed her the mallet.

“What must I do with this thing?” she whispered entreatingly, holding the mallet as if it might bite her.

“Tap with it, madam,” said he.

She did as directed, and murmured the form of words which she had been told to repeat.

“Thank you,” she said softly when all was done, restored to herself by the consciousness that she had performed the last part gracefully. Without lifting her eyes she added, “It was thoughtful of you to remember that I shouldn’t know, and to stand by to tell me.”

Her friends now moved away, but before she had joined them Egbert said, chiefly for the pleasure of speaking to her: “The tower, when it is built, will be seen many miles off.”

“Yes,” she replied in a discreet tone, for many eyes were upon her. “The view is very extensive.” She glanced round upon the whole landscape stretched out before her, in the extreme distance of which was visible the town of Westcombe.

“How long does it take to go to Westcombe across this way?” she asked of him while they were bringing up the carriage.

“About two hours,” he said.

“Two hours — so long as that, does it? How far is it away?”

“Eight miles.”

“Two hours to drive eight miles — who ever heard of such a thing!”

“I thought you meant walking”

“Ah, yes; but one hardly means walking without expressly stating it.”

“Well, it seems just the other way to me — that walking is meant unless you say driving.”

That was the whole of their conversation. The remarks had been simple and trivial, but they brought a similar thought into the minds of both of them. On her part it spread a sudden gloom over her face, and it made him feel dead at heart. It was that horrid thought of their differing habits and of those contrasting positions which could not be reconciled.

Indeed, this perception of their disparity weighed more and more heavily upon him as the days went on. There was no doubt about their being lovers, though scarcely recognized by themselves as such; and, in spite of Geraldine’s warm and unreflecting impulses, a sense of how little Egbert was accustomed to what is called society, and

the polite forms which constant usage had made almost nature with her, would rise on occasion, and rob her of many an otherwise pleasant minute. When any little occurrence had brought this into more prominence than usual, Egbert would go away, wander about the lanes, and be kept awake a great part of the night by the distress of mind such a recognition brought upon him. How their intimacy would end, in what uneasiness, yearning, and misery, he could not guess. As for picturing a future of happiness with her by his side there was not ground enough upon which to rest the momentary imagination of it. Thus they mutually oppressed each other even while they loved.

In addition to this anxiety was another; what would be thought of their romance by her father, if he were to find it out? It was impossible to tell him, for nothing could come of that but Egbert's dismissal and Geraldine's seclusion; and how could these be borne?

He looked round anxiously for some means of deliverance. There were two things to be thought of, the saving of her dignity, and the saving of his and her happiness. That to accomplish the first he ought voluntarily to leave the village before their attachment got known, and never seek her again, was what he sometimes felt; but the idea brought such misery along with it that it died out under contemplation.

He determined at all events to put the case clearly before her, to heroically set forth at their next meeting the true bearings of their position, which she plainly did not realise to the full as yet. It had never entered her mind that the link between them might be observed by the curious, and instantly talked of. Yes, it was his duty to warn her, even though by so doing he would be heaping coals of fire on his own head. For by acting upon his hint she would be lost to him, and the charm that lay in her false notions of the world be forever destroyed.

That they would ultimately be found out, and Geraldine be lowered in local estimation, was, indeed, almost inevitable. There was one grain of satisfaction only among this mass of distresses. Whatever should become public, only the fashionable side of her character could be depreciated; the natural woman, the specimen of English girlhood that he loved, no one could impugn or harm.

Meetings had latterly taken place between them without any pretence of accident, and these were facilitated in an amazing manner by the duty imposed upon her of visiting the school as the representative of her father. At her very next appearance he told her all he thought. It was when the children had left the room for the quarter of an hour's airing that he gave them in the middle of the morning.

She was quite hurt at being treated with justice, and a crowd of tears came into her sorrowful eyes. She had never thought of half that he feared, and almost questioned his kindness in enlightening her.

"Perhaps you are right," she murmured, with the merest motion of lip. "Yes, it is sadly true. Should our conduct become known, nobody will judge us fairly. 'She was a wild, weak girl,' they will say."

“To care for such a man — a village youth. They will even suppress the fact that his father was a painter of no mean power, and a gentleman by education, little as it would redeem us; and justify their doing so by reflecting that in adding to the contrast they improve the tale.

And calumny meanwhile shall feed on us
As worms devour the dead: what we have done
None shall dare vouch, though it be truly known.

And they will continue, ‘He was an artful fellow to win a girl’s affections in that way — one of the mere scum of the earth,’ they’ll say.”

“Don’t, don’t make it so bad!” she implored, weeping outright. “They cannot go so far. Human nature is not so wicked and blind. And they dare not speak so disrespectfully of me, or of any one I choose to favour.” A slight haughtiness was apparent in these words. “But, oh, don’t let us talk of it — it makes the time miserable.”

However, she had been warned. But the difficulty which presented itself to her mind was, after all, but a small portion of the whole. It was how should they meet together without causing a convulsion in neighbouring society. His was more radical and complex. The only natural drift of love was towards marriage. But how could he picture, at any length of years ahead, her in a cottage as his wife, or himself in a mansion as her husband? He in the one case, she in the other, were alike painfully incredible.

But time had flown, and he conducted her to the door. “Good-bye, Egbert,” she said tenderly.

“Good-bye, dear, dear madam,” he answered; and she was gone.

Geraldine had never hinted to him to call her by her Christian name, and finding that she did not particularly wish it he did not care to do so. “Madam” was as good a name as any other for her, and by adhering to it and using it at the warmest moments it seemed to change its nature from that of a mere title to a soft pet sound. He often wondered in after days at the strange condition of a girl’s heart, which could allow so much in reality, and at the same time permit the existence of a little barrier such as that; how the keen, intelligent mind of woman could be ever so slightly hoodwinked by a sound. Yet, perhaps, it was womanlike, after all, and she may have caught at it as the only straw within reach of that dignity or pride of birth which was drowning in her impetuous affection.

CHAPTER VIII.

The world and its ways have a certain worth,
And to press a point while these oppose
Were a simple policy: heat wait,
And we lose no friends, and gain no foes.

The inborn necessity of ransacking the future for a germ of hope led Egbert Mayne to dwell for longer and longer periods on the at first rejected possibility of winning and having her. And apart from any thought of marriage, he knew that Geraldine was sometimes a trifle vexed that their experiences contained so little in common — that he had never dressed for dinner, or made use of a carriage in his life; even though in literature he was her master, thanks to his tastes.

For the first time he seriously contemplated a visionary scheme which had been several times cursorily glanced at; a scheme almost as visionary as any ever entertained by a man not yet blinded to the limits of the possible. Lighted on by impulse, it was not taken up without long calculation, and it was one in which every link was reasoned out as carefully and as clearly as his powers would permit. But the idea that he would be able to carry it through was an assumption which, had he bestowed upon it one hundredth part of the thought spent on the details of its working, he would have thrown aside as unfeasible.

To give up the school, to go to London or elsewhere, and there to try to rise to her level by years of sheer exertion, was the substance of this scheme. However his lady's heart might be grieved by his apparent desertion, he would go. A knowledge of life and of men must be acquired, and that could never be done by thinking at home.

Egbert's abstract love for the gigantic task was but small; but there was absolutely no other honest road to her sphere. That the habits of men should be so subversive of the law of nature as to indicate that he was not worthy to marry a woman whose own instincts said that he was worthy, was a great anomaly, he thought, with some rebelliousness; but this did not upset the fact or remove the difficulty.

He told his fair mistress at their next accidental meeting (much sophistry lay in their definition of "accidental" at this season) that he had determined to leave Tollamore. Mentally she exulted at his spirit, but her heart despaired. He solemnly assured her that it would be much better for them both in the end; and she became submissive, and entirely agreed with him. Then she seemed to acquire a sort of superior insight by virtue of her superior rank, and murmured, "You will expand your mind, and get to despise me for all this, and for my want of pride in being so easily won; and it will end unhappily."

Her imagination so affected her that she could not hinder the tears from falling. Nothing was more effective in checking his despair than the sight of her despairing, and he immediately put on a more hopeful tone.

"No," he said, taking her by the hand, "I shall rise, and become so learned and so famous that — " He did not like to say plainly that he really hoped to win her as his wife, but it is very probable that she guessed his meaning nearly enough.

"You have some secret resources!" she exclaimed. "Some help is promised you in this ambitious plan."

It was most painful to him to have to tell her the truth after this sanguine expectation, and how uncertain and unaided his plans were. However, he cheered her with

the words, "Wait and see." But he himself had many misgivings when her sweet face was turned away.

Upon this plan he acted at once. Nothing of moment occurred during the autumn, and the time for his departure gradually came near. The sale of his grandfather's effects having taken place, and notice having been given at the school, there was very little else for him to do in the way of preparation, for there was no family to be consulted, no household to be removed. On the last day of teaching, when the afternoon lessons were over, he bade farewell to the school children. The younger ones cried, not from any particular reflection on the loss they would sustain, but simply because their hearts were tender to any announcement couched in solemn terms. The elder children sincerely regretted Egbert, as an acquaintance who had not filled the post of schoolmaster so long as to be quite spoilt as a human being.

On the morning of departure he rose at half past three, for Tollamore was a remote nook of a remote district, and it was necessary to start early, his plan being to go by packet from Melport. The candle-flame had a sad and yellow look when it was brought into his bedroom by Nathan Brown, one of his grandfather's old labourers, at whose house he had taken a temporary lodging, and who had agreed to awake him and assist his departure. Few things will take away a man's confidence in an impulsive scheme more than being called up by candlelight upon a chilly morning to commence working it out. But when Egbert heard Nathan's great feet stamping spiritedly about the floor downstairs, in earnest preparation of breakfast, he overcame his weakness and bustled out of bed.

They breakfasted together, Nathan drinking the hot tea with rattling sips, and Egbert thinking as he looked at him that Nathan had never appeared so desirable a man to have about him as now when he was about to give him up.

"Well, good mornen, Mistur Mayne," Nathan said, as he opened the door to let Egbert out. "And mind this, sir; if they used ye bad up there, th'lt always find a hole to put thy head into at Nathan Brown's, I'll warrant as much."

Egbert stepped from the door, and struck across to the manor-house. The morning was dark, and the raw wind made him shiver till walking warmed him. "Good heavens, here's an undertaking!" he sometimes thought. Old trees seemed to look at him through the gloom, as they rocked uneasily to and fro; and now and then a dreary drop of rain beat upon his face as he went on. The dead leaves in the ditches, which could be heard but not seen, shifted their positions with a troubled rustle, and flew at intervals with a little rap against his walking-stick and hat. He was glad to reach the north stile, and get into the park, where, with an anxious pulse, he passed beneath the creaking limes.

"Will she wake soon enough; will she be forgetful, and sleep over the time?" He had asked himself this many times since he rose that morning, and still beset by the inquiry, he drew near to the mansion.

Her bedroom was in the north wing, facing towards the church, and on turning the brow of the hill a faint light in the window reassured him. Taking a few little stones from the path he threw them upon the sill, as they had agreed, and she instantly

opened the window, and said softly, "The butler sleeps on the ground floor on this side, go to the bow-window in the shrubbery."

He went round among the bushes to the place mentioned, which was entirely sheltered from the wind. She soon appeared, bearing in her hand a wax taper, so small that it scarcely gave more light than a glowworm. She wore the same dress that she had worn when they first met on the previous Christmas, and her hair was loose as at that time. Indeed, she looked throughout much as she had looked then, except that her bright eyes were red, as Egbert could see well enough.

"I have something for you," she said softly as she opened the window. "How much time is there?"

"Half an hour only, dearest."

She began a sigh, but checked it, at the same time holding out a packet to him.

"Here are fifty pounds," she whispered. "It will be useful to you now, and more shall follow."

Egbert felt how impossible it was to accept this. "No, my dear one," he said, "I cannot."

"I don't require it, Egbert. I wish you to have it; I have plenty. Come, do take it." But seeing that he continued firm on this point she reluctantly gave in, saying that she would keep it for him.

"I fear so much that papa suspects me," she said. "And if so, it was my own fault, and all owing to a conversation I began with him without thinking beforehand that it would be dangerous."

"What did you say?"

"I said," she whispered, "Suppose a man should love me very much, would you mind my being acquainted with him if he were a very worthy man?" "That depends upon his rank and circumstances," he said. "Suppose," I said, "that in addition to his goodness he had much learning, and had made his name famous in the world, but was not altogether rich?" I think I showed too much earnestness, and I wished that I could have recalled my words. "When the time comes I will tell you," he said, "and don't speak or think of these matters again."

In consequence of this new imprudence of hers Egbert doubted if it would be right to correspond with her. He said nothing about it then, but it added a new shade to the parting.

"I think your decision a good and noble one," she murmured, smiling hopefully. "And you will come back some day a wondrous man of the world, talking of vast schemes, radical errors, and saying such words as the 'backbone of society,' the 'tendency of modern thought,' and other things like that. When papa says to you, 'My lord the chancellor,' you will answer him with 'A tall man, with a deep-toned voice — I know him well.' When he says, 'Such and such were Lord Hatton's words, I think,' you will answer, No, they were Lord Tyrrell's; I was present on the occasion;" and so on in that way. You must get to talk authoritatively about vintages and their dates, and to know all about epicureanism, idleness, and fashion; and so you will beat him with his own

weapons, for he knows nothing of these things. He will criticise you; then he will be nettled; then he will admire you.”

Egbert kissed her hand devotedly, and held it long.

“If you cannot in the least succeed,” she added, “I shall never think the less of you. The truly great stand on no middling ledge; they are either famous or unknown.”

Egbert moved slowly away amongst the laurestines. Holding the light above her bright head she smiled upon him, as if it were unknown to her that she wept at the same time.

He left the park precincts, and followed the turnpike road to Melport. In spite of the misery of parting he felt relieved of a certain oppressiveness, now that his presence at Tollamore could no longer bring disgrace upon her. The threatening rain passed off by the time that he reached the ridge dividing the inland districts from the coast. It began to get light, but his journey was still very lonely. Ultimately the yellow shore-line of pebbles grew visible, and the distant horizon of water spreading like a grey upland against the sky, till he could soon hear the measured flounce of the waves.

He entered the town at sunrise, just as the lamps were extinguished, and went to a tavern to breakfast. At half past eight o'clock the boat steamed out of the harbor, and reached London after a passage of five-and-forty hours.

DESPERATE REMEDIES

This is Hardy's first printed work, published anonymously in 1871 and written in an epistolary style. It is a tale of 'mystery, entanglement, surprise, and moral obliquity', in which Cytherea Graye, beloved by a young architect, Edward Springrove, is forced by poverty to accept a post as lady's maid to the eccentric Miss Aldclyffe, the woman whom her father had loved but had been unable to marry. Miss Adclyffe's schemes, the discovery that Edward is already engaged to a woman whom he does not love, and the urgent need to support a sick brother drive Cytherea to accept the hand of Aeneas Manston, Miss Adclyffe's illegitimate son, a passionate villain, whose first wife is believed to have died in a fire. The consequences of this union and the remarkable denouement make this one of Hardy's most readable and gripping novels.

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I. THE EVENTS OF THIRTY YEARS

1. DECEMBER AND JANUARY, 1835-36

In the long and intricately inwrought chain of circumstance which renders worthy of record some experiences of Cytherea Graye, Edward Springrove, and others, the first event directly influencing the issue was a Christmas visit.

In the above-mentioned year, 1835, Ambrose Graye, a young architect who had just begun the practice of his profession in the midland town of Hocbridge, to the north of Christminster, went to London to spend the Christmas holidays with a friend who lived in Bloomsbury. They had gone up to Cambridge in the same year, and, after graduating together, Huntway, the friend, had taken orders.

Graye was handsome, frank, and gentle. He had a quality of thought which, exercised on homeliness, was humour; on nature, picturesqueness; on abstractions, poetry. Being, as a rule, broadcast, it was all three.

Of the wickedness of the world he was too forgetful. To discover evil in a new friend is to most people only an additional experience: to him it was ever a surprise.

While in London he became acquainted with a retired officer in the Navy named Bradleigh, who, with his wife and their daughter, lived in a street not far from Russell Square. Though they were in no more than comfortable circumstances, the captain's wife came of an ancient family whose genealogical tree was interlaced with some of the most illustrious and well-known in the kingdom.

The young lady, their daughter, seemed to Graye by far the most beautiful and queenly being he had ever beheld. She was about nineteen or twenty, and her name

was Cytherea. In truth she was not so very unlike country girls of that type of beauty, except in one respect. She was perfect in her manner and bearing, and they were not. A mere distinguishing peculiarity, by catching the eye, is often read as the pervading characteristic, and she appeared to him no less than perfection throughout — transcending her rural rivals in very nature. Graye did a thing the blissfulness of which was only eclipsed by its hazardousness. He loved her at first sight.

His introductions had led him into contact with Cytherea and her parents two or three times on the first week of his arrival in London, and accident and a lover's contrivance brought them together as frequently the week following. The parents liked young Graye, and having few friends (for their equals in blood were their superiors in position), he was received on very generous terms. His passion for Cytherea grew not only strong, but ineffably exalted: she, without positively encouraging him, tacitly assented to his schemes for being near her. Her father and mother seemed to have lost all confidence in nobility of birth, without money to give effect to its presence, and looked upon the budding consequence of the young people's reciprocal glances with placidity, if not actual favour.

Graye's whole impassioned dream terminated in a sad and unaccountable episode. After passing through three weeks of sweet experience, he had arrived at the last stage — a kind of moral Gaza — before plunging into an emotional desert. The second week in January had come round, and it was necessary for the young architect to leave town.

Throughout his acquaintanceship with the lady of his heart there had been this marked peculiarity in her love: she had delighted in his presence as a sweetheart should do, yet from first to last she had repressed all recognition of the true nature of the thread which drew them together, blinding herself to its meaning and only natural tendency, and appearing to dread his announcement of them. The present seemed enough for her without cumulative hope: usually, even if love is in itself an end, it must be regarded as a beginning to be enjoyed.

In spite of evasions as an obstacle, and in consequence of them as a spur, he would put the matter off no longer. It was evening. He took her into a little conservatory on the landing, and there among the evergreens, by the light of a few tiny lamps, infinitely enhancing the freshness and beauty of the leaves, he made the declaration of a love as fresh and beautiful as they.

'My love — my darling, be my wife!'

She seemed like one just awakened. 'Ah — we must part now!' she faltered, in a voice of anguish. 'I will write to you.' She loosened her hand and rushed away.

In a wild fever Graye went home and watched for the next morning. Who shall express his misery and wonder when a note containing these words was put into his hand?

'Good-bye; good-bye for ever. As recognized lovers something divides us eternally. Forgive me — I should have told you before; but your love was sweet! Never mention me.'

That very day, and as it seemed, to put an end to a painful condition of things, daughter and parents left London to pay off a promised visit to a relative in a western county. No message or letter of entreaty could wring from her any explanation. She begged him not to follow her, and the most bewildering point was that her father and mother appeared, from the tone of a letter Graye received from them, as vexed and sad as he at this sudden renunciation. One thing was plain: without admitting her reason as valid, they knew what that reason was, and did not intend to reveal it.

A week from that day Ambrose Graye left his friend Huntway's house and saw no more of the Love he mourned. From time to time his friend answered any inquiry Graye made by letter respecting her. But very poor food to a lover is intelligence of a mistress filtered through a friend. Huntway could tell nothing definitely. He said he believed there had been some prior flirtation between Cytherea and her cousin, an officer of the line, two or three years before Graye met her, which had suddenly been terminated by the cousin's departure for India, and the young lady's travelling on the Continent with her parents the whole of the ensuing summer, on account of delicate health. Eventually Huntway said that circumstances had rendered Graye's attachment more hopeless still. Cytherea's mother had unexpectedly inherited a large fortune and estates in the west of England by the rapid fall of some intervening lives. This had caused their removal from the small house in Bloomsbury, and, as it appeared, a renunciation of their old friends in that quarter.

Young Graye concluded that his Cytherea had forgotten him and his love. But he could not forget her.

2. FROM 1843 TO 1861

Eight years later, feeling lonely and depressed — a man without relatives, with many acquaintances but no friends — Ambrose Graye met a young lady of a different kind, fairly endowed with money and good gifts. As to caring very deeply for another woman after the loss of Cytherea, it was an absolute impossibility with him. With all, the beautiful things of the earth become more dear as they elude pursuit; but with some natures utter elusion is the one special event which will make a passing love permanent for ever.

This second young lady and Graye were married. That he did not, first or last, love his wife as he should have done, was known to all; but few knew that his unmanageable heart could never be weaned from useless repining at the loss of its first idol.

His character to some extent deteriorated, as emotional constitutions will under the long sense of disappointment at having missed their imagined destiny. And thus, though naturally of a gentle and pleasant disposition, he grew to be not so tenderly regarded by his acquaintances as it is the lot of some of those persons to be. The winning and sanguine receptivity of his early life developed by degrees a moody nervousness, and when not picturing prospects drawn from baseless hope he was the victim of indescribable depression. The practical issue of such a condition was improvidence, originally almost an unconscious improvidence, for every debt incurred had been mentally paid off with a religious exactness from the treasures of expectation

before mentioned. But as years revolved, the same course was continued from the lack of spirit sufficient for shifting out of an old groove when it has been found to lead to disaster.

In the year 1861 his wife died, leaving him a widower with two children. The elder, a son named Owen, now just turned seventeen, was taken from school, and initiated as pupil to the profession of architect in his father's office. The remaining child was a daughter, and Owen's junior by a year.

Her christian name was Cytherea, and it is easy to guess why.

3. OCTOBER THE TWELFTH, 1863

We pass over two years in order to reach the next cardinal event of these persons' lives. The scene is still the Grayes' native town of Hocbridge, but as it appeared on a Monday afternoon in the month of October.

The weather was sunny and dry, but the ancient borough was to be seen wearing one of its least attractive aspects. First on account of the time. It was that stagnant hour of the twenty-four when the practical garishness of Day, having escaped from the fresh long shadows and enlivening newness of the morning, has not yet made any perceptible advance towards acquiring those mellow and soothing tones which grace its decline. Next, it was that stage in the progress of the week when business — which, carried on under the gables of an old country place, is not devoid of a romantic sparkle — was well-nigh extinguished. Lastly, the town was intentionally bent upon being attractive by exhibiting to an influx of visitors the local talent for dramatic recitation, and provincial towns trying to be lively are the dullest of dull things.

Little towns are like little children in this respect, that they interest most when they are enacting native peculiarities unconscious of beholders. Discovering themselves to be watched they attempt to be entertaining by putting on an antic, and produce disagreeable caricatures which spoil them.

The weather-stained clock-face in the low church tower standing at the intersection of the three chief streets was expressing half-past two to the Town Hall opposite, where the much talked-of reading from Shakespeare was about to begin. The doors were open, and those persons who had already assembled within the building were noticing the entrance of the new-comers — silently criticizing their dress — questioning the genuineness of their teeth and hair — estimating their private means.

Among these later ones came an exceptional young maiden who glowed amid the dulness like a single bright-red poppy in a field of brown stubble. She wore an elegant dark jacket, lavender dress, hat with grey strings and trimmings, and gloves of a colour to harmonize. She lightly walked up the side passage of the room, cast a slight glance around, and entered the seat pointed out to her.

The young girl was Cytherea Graye; her age was now about eighteen. During her entry, and at various times whilst sitting in her seat and listening to the reader on the platform, her personal appearance formed an interesting subject of study for several neighbouring eyes.

Her face was exceedingly attractive, though artistically less perfect than her figure, which approached unusually near to the standard of faultlessness. But even this feature of hers yielded the palm to the gracefulness of her movement, which was fascinating and delightful to an extreme degree.

Indeed, motion was her speciality, whether shown on its most extended scale of bodily progression, or minutely, as in the uplifting of her eyelids, the bending of her fingers, the pouting of her lip. The carriage of her head — motion within motion — a glide upon a glide — was as delicate as that of a magnetic needle. And this flexibility and elasticity had never been taught her by rule, nor even been acquired by observation, but, *nulla cultu*, had naturally developed itself with her years. In childhood, a stone or stalk in the way, which had been the inevitable occasion of a fall to her playmates, had usually left her safe and upright on her feet after the narrowest escape by oscillations and whirls for the preservation of her balance. At mixed Christmas parties, when she numbered but twelve or thirteen years, and was heartily despised on that account by lads who deemed themselves men, her apt lightness in the dance covered this incompleteness in her womanhood, and compelled the self-same youths in spite of resolutions to seize upon her childish figure as a partner whom they could not afford to contemn. And in later years, when the instincts of her sex had shown her this point as the best and rarest feature in her external self, she was not found wanting in attention to the cultivation of finish in its details.

Her hair rested gaily upon her shoulders in curls and was of a shining corn yellow in the high lights, deepening to a definite nut-brown as each curl wound round into the shade. She had eyes of a sapphire hue, though rather darker than the gem ordinarily appears; they possessed the affectionate and liquid sparkle of loyalty and good faith as distinguishable from that harder brightness which seems to express faithfulness only to the object confronting them.

But to attempt to gain a view of her — or indeed of any fascinating woman — from a measured category, is as difficult as to appreciate the effect of a landscape by exploring it at night with a lantern — or of a full chord of music by piping the notes in succession. Nevertheless it may readily be believed from the description here ventured, that among the many winning phases of her aspect, these were particularly striking:

During pleasant doubt, when her eyes brightened stealthily and smiled (as eyes will smile) as distinctly as her lips, and in the space of a single instant expressed clearly the whole round of degrees of expectancy which lie over the wide expanse between Yea and Nay.

During the telling of a secret, which was involuntarily accompanied by a sudden minute start, and ecstatic pressure of the listener's arm, side, or neck, as the position and degree of intimacy dictated.

When anxiously regarding one who possessed her affections.

She suddenly assumed the last-mentioned bearing in the progress of the present entertainment. Her glance was directed out of the window.

Why the particulars of a young lady's presence at a very mediocre performance were prevented from dropping into the oblivion which their intrinsic insignificance would naturally have involved — why they were remembered and individualised by herself and others through after years — was simply that she unknowingly stood, as it were, upon the extreme posterior edge of a tract in her life, in which the real meaning of Taking Thought had never been known. It was the last hour of experience she ever enjoyed with a mind entirely free from a knowledge of that labyrinth into which she stepped immediately afterwards — to continue a perplexed course along its mazes for the greater portion of twenty-nine subsequent months.

The Town Hall, in which Cytherea sat, was a building of brown stone, and through one of the windows could be seen from the interior of the room the housetops and chimneys of the adjacent street, and also the upper part of a neighbouring church spire, now in course of completion under the superintendence of Miss Graye's father, the architect to the work.

That the top of this spire should be visible from her position in the room was a fact which Cytherea's idling eyes had discovered with some interest, and she was now engaged in watching the scene that was being enacted about its airy summit. Round the conical stonework rose a cage of scaffolding against the blue sky, and upon this stood five men — four in clothes as white as the new erection close beneath their hands, the fifth in the ordinary dark suit of a gentleman.

The four working-men in white were three masons and a mason's labourer. The fifth man was the architect, Mr. Graye. He had been giving directions as it seemed, and retiring as far as the narrow footway allowed, stood perfectly still.

The picture thus presented to a spectator in the Town Hall was curious and striking. It was an illuminated miniature, framed in by the dark margin of the window, the keen-edged shadiness of which emphasized by contrast the softness of the objects enclosed.

The height of the spire was about one hundred and twenty feet, and the five men engaged thereon seemed entirely removed from the sphere and experiences of ordinary human beings. They appeared little larger than pigeons, and made their tiny movements with a soft, spirit-like silentness. One idea above all others was conveyed to the mind of a person on the ground by their aspect, namely, concentration of purpose: that they were indifferent to — even unconscious of — the distracted world beneath them, and all that moved upon it. They never looked off the scaffolding.

Then one of them turned; it was Mr. Graye. Again he stood motionless, with attention to the operations of the others. He appeared to be lost in reflection, and had directed his face towards a new stone they were lifting.

'Why does he stand like that?' the young lady thought at length — up to that moment as listless and careless as one of the ancient Tarentines, who, on such an afternoon as this, watched from the Theatre the entry into their Harbour of a power that overturned the State.

She moved herself uneasily. 'I wish he would come down,' she whispered, still gazing at the skybacked picture. 'It is so dangerous to be absent-minded up there.'

When she had done murmuring the words her father indecisively laid hold of one of the scaffold-poles, as if to test its strength, then let it go and stepped back. In stepping, his foot slipped. An instant of doubling forward and sideways, and he reeled off into the air, immediately disappearing downwards.

His agonized daughter rose to her feet by a convulsive movement. Her lips parted, and she gasped for breath. She could utter no sound. One by one the people about her, unconscious of what had happened, turned their heads, and inquiry and alarm became visible upon their faces at the sight of the poor child. A moment longer, and she fell to the floor.

The next impression of which Cytherea had any consciousness was of being carried from a strange vehicle across the pavement to the steps of her own house by her brother and an older man. Recollection of what had passed evolved itself an instant later, and just as they entered the door — through which another and sadder burden had been carried but a few instants before — her eyes caught sight of the south-western sky, and, without heeding, saw white sunlight shining in shaft-like lines from a rift in a slaty cloud. Emotions will attach themselves to scenes that are simultaneous — however foreign in essence these scenes may be — as chemical waters will crystallize on twigs and wires. Even after that time any mental agony brought less vividly to Cytherea's mind the scene from the Town Hall windows than sunlight streaming in shaft-like lines.

4. OCTOBER THE NINETEENTH

When death enters a house, an element of sadness and an element of horror accompany it. Sadness, from the death itself: horror, from the clouds of blackness we designedly labour to introduce.

The funeral had taken place. Depressed, yet resolved in his demeanour, Owen Graye sat before his father's private escritoire, engaged in turning out and unfolding a heterogeneous collection of papers — forbidding and inharmonious to the eye at all times — most of all to one under the influence of a great grief. Laminae of white paper tied with twine were indiscriminately intermixed with other white papers bounded by black edges — these with blue foolscap wrapped round with crude red tape.

The bulk of these letters, bills, and other documents were submitted to a careful examination, by which the appended particulars were ascertained: —

First, that their father's income from professional sources had been very small, amounting to not more than half their expenditure; and that his own and his wife's property, upon which he had relied for the balance, had been sunk and lost in unwise loans to unscrupulous men, who had traded upon their father's too open-hearted trustfulness.

Second, that finding his mistake, he had endeavoured to regain his standing by the illusory path of speculation. The most notable instance of this was the following. He had been induced, when at

Plymouth in the autumn of the previous year, to venture all his spare capital on the bottomry security of an Italian brig which had put into the harbour in distress. The profit was to be considerable, so was the risk. There turned out to be no security whatever. The circumstances of the case tendered it the most unfortunate speculation that a man like himself — ignorant of all such matters — could possibly engage in. The vessel went down, and all Mr. Graye's money with it.

Third, that these failures had left him burdened with debts he knew not how to meet; so that at the time of his death even the few pounds lying to his account at the bank were his only in name.

Fourth, that the loss of his wife two years earlier had awakened him to a keen sense of his blindness, and of his duty by his children. He had then resolved to reinstate by unflagging zeal in the pursuit of his profession, and by no speculation, at least a portion of the little fortune he had let go.

Cytherea was frequently at her brother's elbow during these examinations. She often remarked sadly —

'Poor papa failed to fulfil his good intention for want of time, didn't he, Owen? And there was an excuse for his past, though he never would claim it. I never forget that original disheartening blow, and how that from it sprang all the ills of his life — everything connected with his gloom, and the lassitude in business we used so often to see about him.'

'I remember what he said once,' returned the brother, 'when I sat up late with him. He said, "Owen, don't love too blindly: blindly you will love if you love at all, but a little care is still possible to a well-disciplined heart. May that heart be yours as it was not mine," father said. "Cultivate the art of renunciation." And I am going to, Cytherea.'

'And once mamma said that an excellent woman was papa's ruin, because he did not know the way to give her up when he had lost her. I wonder where she is now, Owen? We were told not to try to find out anything about her. Papa never told us her name, did he?'

'That was by her own request, I believe. But never mind her; she was not our mother.'

The love affair which had been Ambrose Graye's disheartening blow was precisely of that nature which lads take little account of, but girls ponder in their hearts.

5. FROM OCTOBER THE NINETEENTH TO JULY THE NINTH

Thus Ambrose Graye's good intentions with regard to the reintegration of his property had scarcely taken tangible form when his sudden death put them for ever out of his power.

Heavy bills, showing the extent of his obligations, tumbled in immediately upon the heels of the funeral from quarters previously unheard and unthought of. Thus pressed,

a bill was filed in Chancery to have the assets, such as they were, administered by the Court.

‘What will become of us now?’ thought Owen continually.

There is in us an unquenchable expectation, which at the gloomiest time persists in inferring that because we are ourselves, there must be a special future in store for us, though our nature and antecedents to the remotest particular have been common to thousands. Thus to Cytherea and Owen Graye the question how their lives would end seemed the deepest of possible enigmas. To others who knew their position equally well with themselves the question was the easiest that could be asked — ‘Like those of other people similarly circumstanced.’

Then Owen held a consultation with his sister to come to some decision on their future course, and a month was passed in waiting for answers to letters, and in the examination of schemes more or less futile. Sudden hopes that were rainbows to the sight proved but mists to the touch. In the meantime, unpleasant remarks, disguise them as some well-meaning people might, were floating around them every day. The undoubted truth, that they were the children of a dreamer who let slip away every farthing of his money and ran into debt with his neighbours — that the daughter had been brought up to no profession — that the son who had, had made no progress in it, and might come to the dogs — could not from the nature of things be wrapped up in silence in order that it might not hurt their feelings; and as a matter of fact, it greeted their ears in some form or other wherever they went. Their few acquaintances passed them hurriedly. Ancient pot-wallopers, and thriving shopkeepers, in their intervals of leisure, stood at their shop-doors — their toes hanging over the edge of the step, and their obese waists hanging over their toes — and in discourses with friends on the pavement, formulated the course of the improvident, and reduced the children’s prospects to a shadow-like attenuation. The sons of these men (who wore breastpins of a sarcastic kind, and smoked humorous pipes) stared at Cytherea with a stare unmitigated by any of the respect that had formerly softened it.

Now it is a noticeable fact that we do not much mind what men think of us, or what humiliating secret they discover of our means, parentage, or object, provided that each thinks and acts thereupon in isolation. It is the exchange of ideas about us that we dread most; and the possession by a hundred acquaintances, severally insulated, of the knowledge of our skeleton-closet’s whereabouts, is not so distressing to the nerves as a chat over it by a party of half-a-dozen — exclusive depositaries though these may be.

Perhaps, though Hocbridge watched and whispered, its animus would have been little more than a trifle to persons in thriving circumstances. But unfortunately, poverty, whilst it is new, and before the skin has had time to thicken, makes people susceptible inversely to their opportunities for shielding themselves. In Owen was found, in place of his father’s impressibility, a larger share of his father’s pride, and a squareness of idea which, if coupled with a little more blindness, would have amounted to positive prejudice. To him humanity, so far as he had thought of it at all, was rather divided into distinct classes than blended from extreme to extreme. Hence by a sequence of

ideas which might be traced if it were worth while, he either detested or respected opinion, and instinctively sought to escape a cold shade that mere sensitiveness would have endured. He could have submitted to separation, sickness, exile, drudgery, hunger and thirst, with stoical indifference, but superciliousness was too incisive.

After living on for nine months in attempts to make an income as his father's successor in the profession — attempts which were utterly fruitless by reason of his inexperience — Graye came to a simple and sweeping resolution. They would privately leave that part of England, drop from the sight of acquaintances, gossips, harsh critics, and bitter creditors of whose misfortune he was not the cause, and escape the position which galled him by the only road their great poverty left open to them — that of his obtaining some employment in a distant place by following his profession as a humble under-draughtsman.

He thought over his capabilities with the sensations of a soldier grinding his sword at the opening of a campaign. What with lack of employment, owing to the decrease of his late father's practice, and the absence of direct and uncompromising pressure towards monetary results from a pupil's labour (which seems to be always the case when a professional man's pupil is also his son), Owen's progress in the art and science of architecture had been very insignificant indeed. Though anything but an idle young man, he had hardly reached the age at which industrious men who lack an external whip to send them on in the world, are induced by their own common sense to whip on themselves. Hence his knowledge of plans, elevations, sections, and specifications, was not greater at the end of two years of probation than might easily have been acquired in six months by a youth of average ability — himself, for instance — amid a bustling London practice.

But at any rate he could make himself handy to one of the profession — some man in a remote town — and there fulfil his indentures. A tangible inducement lay in this direction of survey. He had a slight conception of such a man — a Mr. Gradfield — who was in practice in Budmouth Regis, a seaport town and watering-place in the south of England.

After some doubts, Graye ventured to write to this gentleman, asking the necessary question, shortly alluding to his father's death, and stating that his term of apprenticeship had only half expired. He would be glad to complete his articles at a very low salary for the whole remaining two years, provided payment could begin at once.

The answer from Mr. Gradfield stated that he was not in want of a pupil who would serve the remainder of his time on the terms Mr. Graye mentioned. But he would just add one remark. He chanced to be in want of some young man in his office — for a short time only, probably about two months — to trace drawings, and attend to other subsidiary work of the kind. If Mr. Graye did not object to occupy such an inferior position as these duties would entail, and to accept weekly wages which to one with his expectations would be considered merely nominal, the post would give him an opportunity for learning a few more details of the profession.

'It is a beginning, and, above all, an abiding-place, away from the shadow of the cloud which hangs over us here — I will go,' said Owen.

Cytherea's plan for her future, an intensely simple one, owing to the even greater narrowness of her resources, was already marked out. One advantage had accrued to her through her mother's possession of a fair share of personal property, and perhaps only one. She had been carefully educated. Upon this consideration her plan was based. She was to take up her abode in her brother's lodging at Budmouth, when she would immediately advertise for a situation as governess, having obtained the consent of a lawyer at Aldbrickham who was winding up her father's affairs, and who knew the history of her position, to allow himself to be referred to in the matter of her past life and respectability.

Early one morning they departed from their native town, leaving behind them scarcely a trace of their footsteps.

Then the town pitied their want of wisdom in taking such a step. 'Rashness; they would have made a better income in Hocbridge, where they are known! There is no doubt that they would.'

But what is Wisdom really? A steady handling of any means to bring about any end necessary to happiness.

Yet whether one's end be the usual end — a wealthy position in life — or no, the name of wisdom is seldom applied but to the means to that usual end.

II. THE EVENTS OF A FORTNIGHT

1. THE NINTH OF JULY

The day of their departure was one of the most glowing that the climax of a long series of summer heats could evolve. The wide expanse of landscape quivered up and down like the flame of a taper, as they steamed along through the midst of it. Placid flocks of sheep reclining under trees a little way off appeared of a pale blue colour. Clover fields were livid with the brightness of the sun upon their deep red flowers. All waggons and carts were moved to the shade by their careful owners, rain-water butts fell to pieces; well-buckets were lowered inside the covers of the well-hole, to preserve them from the fate of the butts, and generally, water seemed scarcer in the country than the beer and cider of the peasantry who toiled or idled there.

To see persons looking with children's eyes at any ordinary scenery, is a proof that they possess the charming faculty of drawing new sensations from an old experience — a healthy sign, rare in these feverish days — the mark of an imperishable brightness of nature.

Both brother and sister could do this; Cytherea more noticeably. They watched the undulating corn-lands, monotonous to all their companions; the stony and clayey prospect succeeding those, with its angular and abrupt hills. Boggy moors came next, now withered and dry — the spots upon which pools usually spread their waters show-

ing themselves as circles of smooth bare soil, over-run by a net-work of innumerable little fissures. Then arose plantations of firs, abruptly terminating beside meadows cleanly mown, in which high-hipped, rich-coloured cows, with backs horizontal and straight as the ridge of a house, stood motionless or lazily fed. Glimpses of the sea now interested them, which became more and more frequent till the train finally drew up beside the platform at Budmouth.

‘The whole town is looking out for us,’ had been Graye’s impression throughout the day. He called upon Mr. Gradfield — the only man who had been directly informed of his coming — and found that Mr. Gradfield had forgotten it.

However, arrangements were made with this gentleman — a stout, active, grey-bearded burgher of sixty — by which Owen was to commence work in his office the following week.

The same day Cytherea drew up and sent off the advertisement appended: —
‘A YOUNG LADY is desirous of meeting with an engagement as
governess or companion. She is competent to teach English,
French, and Music. Satisfactory references — Address, C. G.,
Post-Office, Budmouth.’

It seemed a more material existence than her own that she saw thus delineated on the paper. ‘That can’t be myself; how odd I look!’ she said, and smiled.

2. JULY THE ELEVENTH

On the Monday subsequent to their arrival in Budmouth, Owen Graye attended at Mr. Gradfield’s office to enter upon his duties, and his sister was left in their lodgings alone for the first time.

Despite the sad occurrences of the preceding autumn, an unwonted cheerfulness pervaded her spirit throughout the day. Change of scene — and that to untravelled eyes — conjoined with the sensation of freedom from supervision, revived the sparkle of a warm young nature ready enough to take advantage of any adventitious restoratives. Point-blank grief tends rather to seal up happiness for a time than to produce that attrition which results from griefs of anticipation that move onward with the days: these may be said to furrow away the capacity for pleasure.

Her expectations from the advertisement began to be extravagant. A thriving family, who had always sadly needed her, was already definitely pictured in her fancy, which, in its exuberance, led her on to picturing its individual members, their possible peculiarities, virtues, and vices, and obliterated for a time the recollection that she would be separated from her brother.

Thus musing, as she waited for his return in the evening, her eyes fell on her left hand. The contemplation of her own left fourth finger by symbol-loving girlhood of this age is, it seems, very frequently, if not always, followed by a peculiar train of romantic ideas. Cytherea’s thoughts, still playing about her future, became directed into this romantic groove. She leant back in her chair, and taking hold of the fourth finger, which had attracted her attention, she lifted it with the tips of the others, and looked at the smooth and tapering member for a long time.

She whispered idly, 'I wonder who and what he will be?

'If he's a gentleman of fashion, he will take my finger so, just with the tips of his own, and with some fluttering of the heart, and the least trembling of his lip, slip the ring so lightly on that I shall hardly know it is there — looking delightfully into my eyes all the time.

'If he's a bold, dashing soldier, I expect he will proudly turn round, take the ring as if it equalled her Majesty's crown in value, and desperately set it on my finger thus. He will fix his eyes unflinchingly upon what he is doing — just as if he stood in battle before the enemy (though, in reality, very fond of me, of course), and blush as much as I shall.

'If he's a sailor, he will take my finger and the ring in this way, and deck it out with a housewifely touch and a tenderness of expression about his mouth, as sailors do: kiss it, perhaps, with a simple air, as if we were children playing an idle game, and not at the very height of observation and envy by a great crowd saying, "Ah! they are happy now!"

'If he should be rather a poor man — noble-minded and affectionate, but still poor — '

Owen's footsteps rapidly ascending the stairs, interrupted this fancy-free meditation. Reproaching herself, even angry with herself for allowing her mind to stray upon such subjects in the face of their present desperate condition, she rose to meet him, and make tea.

Cytherea's interest to know how her brother had been received at Mr. Gradfield's broke forth into words at once. Almost before they had sat down to table, she began cross-examining him in the regular sisterly way.

'Well, Owen, how has it been with you to-day? What is the place like — do you think you will like Mr. Gradfield?'

'O yes. But he has not been there to-day; I have only had the head draughtsman with me.'

Young women have a habit, not noticeable in men, of putting on at a moment's notice the drama of whosoever's life they choose. Cytherea's interest was transferred from Mr. Gradfield to his representative.

'What sort of a man is he?'

'He seems a very nice fellow indeed; though of course I can hardly tell to a certainty as yet. But I think he's a very worthy fellow; there's no nonsense in him, and though he is not a public school man he has read widely, and has a sharp appreciation of what's good in books and art. In fact, his knowledge isn't nearly so exclusive as most professional men's.'

'That's a great deal to say of an architect, for of all professional men they are, as a rule, the most professional.'

'Yes; perhaps they are. This man is rather of a melancholy turn of mind, I think.'

'Has the managing clerk any family?' she mildly asked, after a while, pouring out some more tea.

'Family; no!'

'Well, dear Owen, how should I know?'

'Why, of course he isn't married. But there happened to be a conversation about women going on in the office, and I heard him say what he should wish his wife to be like.'

'What would he wish his wife to be like?' she said, with great apparent lack of interest.

'O, he says she must be girlish and artless: yet he would be loth to do without a dash of womanly subtlety, 'tis so piquant. Yes, he said, that must be in her; she must have womanly cleverness. "And yet I should like her to blush if only a cock-sparrow were to look at her hard," he said, "which brings me back to the girl again: and so I flit backwards and forwards. I must have what comes, I suppose," he said, "and whatever she may be, thank God she's no worse. However, if he might give a final hint to Providence," he said, "a child among pleasures, and a woman among pains was the rough outline of his requirement."

'Did he say that? What a musing creature he must be.'

'He did, indeed.'

3. FROM THE TWELFTH TO THE FIFTEENTH OF JULY

As is well known, ideas are so elastic in a human brain, that they have no constant measure which may be called their actual bulk. Any important idea may be compressed to a molecule by an unwonted crowding of others; and any small idea will expand to whatever length and breadth of vacuum the mind may be able to make over to it. Cytherea's world was tolerably vacant at this time, and the young architectural designer's image became very pervasive. The next evening this subject was again renewed.

'His name is Springrove,' said Owen, in reply to her. 'He is a thorough artist, but a man of rather humble origin, it seems, who has made himself so far. I think he is the son of a farmer, or something of the kind.'

'Well, he's none the worse for that, I suppose.'

'None the worse. As we come down the hill, we shall be continually meeting people going up.' But Owen had felt that Springrove was a little the worse nevertheless.

'Of course he's rather old by this time.'

'O no. He's about six-and-twenty — not more.'

'Ah, I see... What is he like, Owen?'

'I can't exactly tell you his appearance: 'tis always such a difficult thing to do.'

'A man you would describe as short? Most men are those we should describe as short, I fancy.'

'I should call him, I think, of the middle height; but as I only see him sitting in the office, of course I am not certain about his form and figure.'

'I wish you were, then.'

'Perhaps you do. But I am not, you see.'

‘Of course not, you are always so provoking. Owen, I saw a man in the street to-day whom I fancied was he — and yet, I don’t see how it could be, either. He had light brown hair, a snub nose, very round face, and a peculiar habit of reducing his eyes to straight lines when he looked narrowly at anything.’

‘O no. That was not he, Cytherea.’

‘Not a bit like him in all probability.’

‘Not a bit. He has dark hair — almost a Grecian nose, regular teeth, and an intellectual face, as nearly as I can recall to mind.’

‘Ah, there now, Owen, you have described him! But I suppose he’s not generally called pleasing, or — ’

‘Handsome?’

‘I scarcely meant that. But since you have said it, is he handsome?’

‘Rather.’

‘His tout ensemble is striking?’

‘Yes — O no, no — I forgot: it is not. He is rather untidy in his waistcoat, and neck-ties, and hair.’

‘How vexing!... it must be to himself, poor thing.’

‘He’s a thorough bookworm — despises the pap-and-daisy school of verse — knows Shakespeare to the very dregs of the foot-notes. Indeed, he’s a poet himself in a small way.’

‘How delicious!’ she said. ‘I have never known a poet.’

‘And you don’t know him,’ said Owen dryly.

She reddened. ‘Of course I don’t. I know that.’

‘Have you received any answer to your advertisement?’ he inquired.

‘Ah — no!’ she said, and the forgotten disappointment which had showed itself in her face at different times during the day, became visible again.

Another day passed away. On Thursday, without inquiry, she learnt more of the head draughtsman. He and Graye had become very friendly, and he had been tempted to show her brother a copy of some poems of his — some serious and sad — some humorous — which had appeared in the poets’ corner of a magazine from time to time. Owen showed them now to Cytherea, who instantly began to read them carefully and to think them very beautiful.

‘Yes — Springrove’s no fool,’ said Owen sententiously.

‘No fool! — I should think he isn’t, indeed,’ said Cytherea, looking up from the paper in quite an excitement: ‘to write such verses as these!’

‘What logic are you chopping, Cytherea? Well, I don’t mean on account of the verses, because I haven’t read them; but for what he said when the fellows were talking about falling in love.’

‘Which you will tell me?’

‘He says that your true lover breathlessly finds himself engaged to a sweetheart, like a man who has caught something in the dark. He doesn’t know whether it is a bat or a bird, and takes it to the light when he is cool to learn what it is. He looks to

see if she is the right age, but right age or wrong age, he must consider her a prize. Sometime later he ponders whether she is the right kind of prize for him. Right kind or wrong kind — he has called her his, and must abide by it. After a time he asks himself, “Has she the temper, hair, and eyes I meant to have, and was firmly resolved not to do without?” He finds it is all wrong, and then comes the tussle — ’

‘Do they marry and live happily?’

‘Who? O, the supposed pair. I think he said — well, I really forget what he said.’

‘That is stupid of you!’ said the young lady with dismay.

‘Yes.’

‘But he’s a satirist — I don’t think I care about him now.’

‘There you are just wrong. He is not. He is, as I believe, an impulsive fellow who has been made to pay the penalty of his rashness in some love affair.’

Thus ended the dialogue of Thursday, but Cytherea read the verses again in private. On Friday her brother remarked that Springrove had informed him he was going to leave Mr. Gradfield’s in a fortnight to push his fortunes in London.

An indescribable feeling of sadness shot through Cytherea’s heart. Why should she be sad at such an announcement as that, she thought, concerning a man she had never seen, when her spirits were elastic enough to rebound after hard blows from deep and real troubles as if she had scarcely known them? Though she could not answer this question, she knew one thing, she was saddened by Owen’s news.

4. JULY THE TWENTY-FIRST

A very popular local excursion by steamboat to Lulstead Cove was announced through the streets of Budmouth one Thursday morning by the weak-voiced towncrier, to start at six o’clock the same day. The weather was lovely, and the opportunity being the first of the kind offered to them, Owen and Cytherea went with the rest.

They had reached the Cove, and had walked landward for nearly an hour over the hill which rose beside the strand, when Graye recollected that two or three miles yet further inland from this spot was an interesting mediaeval ruin. He was already familiar with its characteristics through the medium of an archaeological work, and now finding himself so close to the reality, felt inclined to verify some theory he had formed respecting it. Concluding that there would be just sufficient time for him to go there and return before the boat had left the shore, he parted from Cytherea on the hill, struck downwards, and then up a heathery valley.

She remained on the summit where he had left her till the time of his expected return, scanning the details of the prospect around. Placidly spread out before her on the south was the open Channel, reflecting a blue intenser by many shades than that of the sky overhead, and dotted in the foreground by half-a-dozen small craft of contrasting rig, their sails graduating in hue from extreme whiteness to reddish brown, the varying actual colours varied again in a double degree by the rays of the declining sun.

Presently the distant bell from the boat was heard, warning the passengers to embark. This was followed by a lively air from the harps and violins on board, their tones,

as they arose, becoming intermingled with, though not marred by, the brush of the waves when their crests rolled over — at the point where the check of the shallows was first felt — and then thinned away up the slope of pebbles and sand.

She turned her face landward and strained her eyes to discern, if possible, some sign of Owen's return. Nothing was visible save the strikingly brilliant, still landscape. The wide concave which lay at the back of the hill in this direction was blazing with the western light, adding an orange tint to the vivid purple of the heather, now at the very climax of bloom, and free from the slightest touch of the invidious brown that so soon creeps into its shades. The light so intensified the colours that they seemed to stand above the surface of the earth and float in mid-air like an exhalation of red. In the minor valleys, between the hillocks and ridges which diversified the contour of the basin, but did not disturb its general sweep, she marked brakes of tall, heavy-stemmed ferns, five or six feet high, in a brilliant light-green dress — a broad riband of them with the path in their midst winding like a stream along the little ravine that reached to the foot of the hill, and delivered up the path to its grassy area. Among the ferns grew holly bushes deeper in tint than any shadow about them, whilst the whole surface of the scene was dimpled with small conical pits, and here and there were round ponds, now dry, and half overgrown with rushes.

The last bell of the steamer rang. Cytherea had forgotten herself, and what she was looking for. In a fever of distress lest Owen should be left behind, she gathered up in her hand the corners of her handkerchief, containing specimens of the shells, plants, and fossils which the locality produced, started off to the sands, and mingled with the knots of visitors there congregated from other interesting points around; from the inn, the cottages, and hired conveyances that had returned from short drives inland. They all went aboard by the primitive plan of a narrow plank on two wheels — the women being assisted by a rope. Cytherea lingered till the very last, reluctant to follow, and looking alternately at the boat and the valley behind. Her delay provoked a remark from Captain Jacobs, a thickset man of hybrid stains, resulting from the mixed effects of fire and water, peculiar to sailors where engines are the propelling power.

'Now then, missy, if you please. I am sorry to tell 'ee our time's up. Who are you looking for, miss?'

'My brother — he has walked a short distance inland; he must be here directly. Could you wait for him — just a minute?'

'Really, I am afraid not, m'm.' Cytherea looked at the stout, round-faced man, and at the vessel, with a light in her eyes so expressive of her own opinion being the same, on reflection, as his, and with such resignation, too, that, from an instinctive feeling of pride at being able to prove himself more humane than he was thought to be — works of supererogation are the only sacrifices that entice in this way — and that at a very small cost, he delayed the boat till some among the passengers began to murmur.

'There, never mind,' said Cytherea decisively. 'Go on without me — I shall wait for him.'

‘Well, ‘tis a very awkward thing to leave you here all alone,’ said the captain. ‘I certainly advise you not to wait.’

‘He’s gone across to the railway station, for certain,’ said another passenger.

‘No — here he is!’ Cytherea said, regarding, as she spoke, the half hidden figure of a man who was seen advancing at a headlong pace down the ravine which lay between the heath and the shore.

‘He can’t get here in less than five minutes,’ a passenger said. ‘People should know what they are about, and keep time. Really, if — ’

‘You see, sir,’ said the captain, in an apologetic undertone, ‘since ‘tis her brother, and she’s all alone, ‘tis only nater to wait a minute, now he’s in sight. Suppose, now, you were a young woman, as might be, and had a brother, like this one, and you stood of an evening upon this here wild lonely shore, like her, why you’d want us to wait, too, wouldn’t you, sir? I think you would.’

The person so hastily approaching had been lost to view during this remark by reason of a hollow in the ground, and the projecting cliff immediately at hand covered the path in its rise. His footsteps were now heard striking sharply upon the flinty road at a distance of about twenty or thirty yards, but still behind the escarpment. To save time, Cytherea prepared to ascend the plank.

‘Let me give you my hand, miss,’ said Captain Jacobs.

‘No — please don’t touch me,’ said she, ascending cautiously by sliding one foot forward two or three inches, bringing up the other behind it, and so on alternately — her lips compressed by concentration on the feat, her eyes glued to the plank, her hand to the rope, and her immediate thought to the fact of the distressing narrowness of her footing. Steps now shook the lower end of the board, and in an instant were up to her heels with a bound.

‘O, Owen, I am so glad you are come!’ she said without turning. ‘Don’t, don’t shake the plank or touch me, whatever you do... There, I am up. Where have you been so long?’ she continued, in a lower tone, turning round to him as she reached the top.

Raising her eyes from her feet, which, standing on the firm deck, demanded her attention no longer, she acquired perceptions of the new-comer in the following order: unknown trousers; unknown waistcoat; unknown face. The man was not her brother, but a total stranger.

Off went the plank; the paddles started, stopped, backed, pattered in confusion, then revolved decisively, and the boat passed out into deep water.

One or two persons had said, ‘How d’ye do, Mr. Springrove?’ and looked at Cytherea, to see how she bore her disappointment. Her ears had but just caught the name of the head draughtsman, when she saw him advancing directly to address her.

‘Miss Graye, I believe?’ he said, lifting his hat.

‘Yes,’ said Cytherea, colouring, and trying not to look guilty of a surreptitious knowledge of him.

‘I am Mr. Springrove. I passed Corvsgate Castle about an hour ago, and soon afterwards met your brother going that way. He had been deceived in the distance,

and was about to turn without seeing the ruin, on account of a lameness that had come on in his leg or foot. I proposed that he should go on, since he had got so near; and afterwards, instead of walking back to the boat, get across to Anglebury Station — a shorter walk for him — where he could catch the late train, and go directly home. I could let you know what he had done, and allay any uneasiness.’

‘Is the lameness serious, do you know?’

‘O no; simply from over-walking himself. Still, it was just as well to ride home.’

Relieved from her apprehensions on Owen’s score, she was able slightly to examine the appearance of her informant — Edward Springrove — who now removed his hat for a while, to cool himself. He was rather above her brother’s height. Although the upper part of his face and head was handsomely formed, and bounded by lines of sufficiently masculine regularity, his brows were somewhat too softly arched, and finely pencilled for one of his sex; without prejudice, however, to the belief which the sum total of his features inspired — that though they did not prove that the man who thought inside them would do much in the world, men who had done most of all had had no better ones. Across his forehead, otherwise perfectly smooth, ran one thin line, the healthy freshness of his remaining features expressing that it had come there prematurely.

Though some years short of the age at which the clear spirit bids good-bye to the last infirmity of noble mind, and takes to house-hunting and investments, he had reached the period in a young man’s life when episodic periods, with a hopeful birth and a disappointing death, have begun to accumulate, and to bear a fruit of generalities; his glance sometimes seeming to state, ‘I have already thought out the issue of such conditions as these we are experiencing.’ At other times he wore an abstracted look: ‘I seem to have lived through this moment before.’

He was carelessly dressed in dark grey, wearing a rolled-up black kerchief as a neck-cloth; the knot of which was disarranged, and stood obliquely — a deposit of white dust having lodged in the creases.

‘I am sorry for your disappointment,’ he continued, glancing into her face. Their eyes having met, became, as it were, mutually locked together, and the single instant only which good breeding allows as the length of such a look, became trebled: a clear penetrating ray of intelligence had shot from each into each, giving birth to one of those unaccountable sensations which carry home to the heart before the hand has been touched or the merest compliment passed, by something stronger than mathematical proof, the conviction, ‘A tie has begun to unite us.’

Both faces also unconsciously stated that their owners had been much in each other’s thoughts of late. Owen had talked to the young architect of his sister as freely as to Cytherea of the young architect.

A conversation began, which was none the less interesting to the parties engaged because it consisted only of the most trivial and commonplace remarks. Then the band of harps and violins struck up a lively melody, and the deck was cleared for dancing; the sun dipping beneath the horizon during the proceeding, and the moon showing herself at their stern. The sea was so calm, that the soft hiss produced by the bursting

of the innumerable bubbles of foam behind the paddles could be distinctly heard. The passengers who did not dance, including Cytherea and Springrove, lapsed into silence, leaning against the paddle-boxes, or standing aloof — noticing the trembling of the deck to the steps of the dance — watching the waves from the paddles as they slid thinly and easily under each other's edges.

Night had quite closed in by the time they reached Budmouth harbour, sparkling with its white, red, and green lights in opposition to the shimmering path of the moon's reflection on the other side, which reached away to the horizon till the flecked ripples reduced themselves to sparkles as fine as gold dust.

'I will walk to the station and find out the exact time the train arrives,' said Springrove, rather eagerly, when they had landed.

She thanked him much.

'Perhaps we might walk together,' he suggested hesitatingly. She looked as if she did not quite know, and he settled the question by showing the way.

They found, on arriving there, that on the first day of that month the particular train selected for Graye's return had ceased to stop at Anglebury station.

'I am very sorry I misled him,' said Springrove.

'O, I am not alarmed at all,' replied Cytherea.

'Well, it's sure to be all right — he will sleep there, and come by the first in the morning. But what will you do, alone?'

'I am quite easy on that point; the landlady is very friendly. I must go indoors now. Good-night, Mr. Springrove.'

'Let me go round to your door with you?' he pleaded.

'No, thank you; we live close by.'

He looked at her as a waiter looks at the change he brings back. But she was inexorable.

'Don't — forget me,' he murmured. She did not answer.

'Let me see you sometimes,' he said.

'Perhaps you never will again — I am going away,' she replied in lingering tones; and turning into Cross Street, ran indoors and upstairs.

The sudden withdrawal of what was superfluous at first, is often felt as an essential loss. It was felt now with regard to the maiden. More, too, after a meeting so pleasant and so enkindling, she had seemed to imply that they would never come together again.

The young man softly followed her, stood opposite the house and watched her come into the upper room with the light. Presently his gaze was cut short by her approaching the window and pulling down the blind — Edward dwelling upon her vanishing figure with a hopeless sense of loss akin to that which Adam is said by logicians to have felt when he first saw the sun set, and thought, in his inexperience, that it would return no more.

He waited till her shadow had twice crossed the window, when, finding the charming outline was not to be expected again, he left the street, crossed the harbour-bridge,

and entered his own solitary chamber on the other side, vaguely thinking as he went (for undefined reasons),

‘One hope is too like despair
For prudence to smother.’

III. THE EVENTS OF EIGHT DAYS

1. FROM THE TWENTY-SECOND TO THE TWENTY-SEVENTH OF JULY

But things are not what they seem. A responsive love for Edward Springrove had made its appearance in Cytherea’s bosom with all the fascinating attributes of a first experience, not succeeding to or displacing other emotions, as in older hearts, but taking up entirely new ground; as when gazing just after sunset at the pale blue sky we see a star come into existence where nothing was before.

His parting words, ‘Don’t forget me,’ she repeated to herself a hundred times, and though she thought their import was probably commonplace, she could not help toying with them, — looking at them from all points, and investing them with meanings of love and faithfulness, — ostensibly entertaining such meanings only as fables wherewith to pass the time, yet in her heart admitting, for detached instants, a possibility of their deeper truth. And thus, for hours after he had left her, her reason flirted with her fancy as a kitten will sport with a dove, pleasantly and smoothly through easy attitudes, but disclosing its cruel and unyielding nature at crises.

To turn now to the more material media through which this story moves, it so happened that the very next morning brought round a circumstance which, slight in itself, took up a relevant and important position between the past and the future of the persons herein concerned.

At breakfast time, just as Cytherea had again seen the postman pass without bringing her an answer to the advertisement, as she had fully expected he would do, Owen entered the room.

‘Well,’ he said, kissing her, ‘you have not been alarmed, of course. Springrove told you what I had done, and you found there was no train?’

‘Yes, it was all clear. But what is the lameness owing to?’

‘I don’t know — nothing. It has quite gone off now... Cytherea, I hope you like Springrove. Springrove’s a nice fellow, you know.’

‘Yes. I think he is, except that — ’

‘It happened just to the purpose that I should meet him there, didn’t it? And when I reached the station and learnt that I could not get on by train my foot seemed better. I started off to walk home, and went about five miles along a path beside the railway. It then struck me that I might not be fit for anything to-day if I walked and aggravated the bothering foot, so I looked for a place to sleep at. There was no available village or inn, and I eventually got the keeper of a gate-house, where a lane crossed the line, to take me in.’

They proceeded with their breakfast. Owen yawned.

‘You didn’t get much sleep at the gate-house last night, I’m afraid, Owen,’ said his sister.

‘To tell the truth, I didn’t. I was in such very close and narrow quarters. Those gate-houses are such small places, and the man had only his own bed to offer me. Ah, by-the-bye, Cythie, I have such an extraordinary thing to tell you in connection with this man! — by Jove, I had nearly forgotten it! But I’ll go straight on. As I was saying, he had only his own bed to offer me, but I could not afford to be fastidious, and as he had a hearty manner, though a very queer one, I agreed to accept it, and he made a rough pallet for himself on the floor close beside me. Well, I could not sleep for my life, and I wished I had not stayed there, though I was so tired. For one thing, there were the luggage trains rattling by at my elbow the early part of the night. But worse than this, he talked continually in his sleep, and occasionally struck out with his limbs at something or another, knocking against the post of the bedstead and making it tremble. My condition was altogether so unsatisfactory that at last I awoke him, and asked him what he had been dreaming about for the previous hour, for I could get no sleep at all. He begged my pardon for disturbing me, but a name I had casually let fall that evening had led him to think of another stranger he had once had visit him, who had also accidentally mentioned the same name, and some very strange incidents connected with that meeting. The affair had occurred years and years ago; but what I had said had made him think and dream about it as if it were but yesterday. What was the word? I said. “Cytherea,” he said. What was the story? I asked then. He then told me that when he was a young man in London he borrowed a few pounds to add to a few he had saved up, and opened a little inn at Hammersmith. One evening, after the inn had been open about a couple of months, every idler in the neighbourhood ran off to Westminster. The Houses of Parliament were on fire.

‘Not a soul remained in his parlour besides himself, and he began picking up the pipes and glasses his customers had hastily relinquished. At length a young lady about seventeen or eighteen came in. She asked if a woman was there waiting for herself — Miss Jane Taylor. He said no; asked the young lady if she would wait, and showed her into the small inner room. There was a glass-pane in the partition dividing this room from the bar to enable the landlord to see if his visitors, who sat there, wanted anything. A curious awkwardness and melancholy about the behaviour of the girl who called, caused my informant to look frequently at her through the partition. She seemed weary of her life, and sat with her face buried in her hands, evidently quite out of her element in such a house. Then a woman much older came in and greeted Miss Taylor by name. The man distinctly heard the following words pass between them: —

“Why have you not brought him?”

“He is ill; he is not likely to live through the night.”

‘At this announcement from the elderly woman, the young lady fell to the floor in a swoon, apparently overcome by the news. The landlord ran in and lifted her up. Well, do what they would they could not for a long time bring her back to consciousness,

and began to be much alarmed. "Who is she?" the innkeeper said to the other woman. "I know her," the other said, with deep meaning in her tone. The elderly and young woman seemed allied, and yet strangers.

'She now showed signs of life, and it struck him (he was plainly of an inquisitive turn), that in her half-bewildered state he might get some information from her. He stooped over her, put his mouth to her ear, and said sharply, "What's your name?" "To catch a woman napping is difficult, even when she's half dead; but I did it," says the gatekeeper. When he asked her her name, she said immediately —

"Cytherea" — and stopped suddenly.'

'My own name!' said Cytherea.

'Yes — your name. Well, the gateman thought at the time it might be equally with Jane a name she had invented for the occasion, that they might not trace her; but I think it was truth unconsciously uttered, for she added directly afterwards: "O, what have I said!" and was quite overcome again — this time with fright. Her vexation that the woman now doubted the genuineness of her other name was very much greater than that the innkeeper did, and it is evident that to blind the woman was her main object. He also learnt from words the elderly woman casually dropped, that meetings of the same kind had been held before, and that the falseness of the soi-disant Miss Jane Taylor's name had never been suspected by this dependent or confederate till then.

'She recovered, rested there for an hour, and first sending off her companion peremptorily (which was another odd thing), she left the house, offering the landlord all the money she had to say nothing about the circumstance. He has never seen her since, according to his own account. I said to him again and again, "Did you find any more particulars afterwards?" "Not a syllable," he said. O, he should never hear any more of that! too many years had passed since it happened. "At any rate, you found out her surname?" I said. "Well, well, that's my secret," he went on. "Perhaps I should never have been in this part of the world if it hadn't been for that. I failed as a publican, you know." I imagine the situation of gateman was given him and his debts paid off as a bribe to silence; but I can't say. "Ah, yes!" he said, with a long breath. "I have never heard that name mentioned since that time till to-night, and then there instantly rose to my eyes the vision of that young lady lying in a fainting fit." He then stopped talking and fell asleep. Telling the story must have relieved him as it did the Ancient Mariner, for he did not move a muscle or make another sound for the remainder of the night. Now isn't that an odd story?'

'It is indeed,' Cytherea murmured. 'Very, very strange.'

'Why should she have said your most uncommon name?' continued Owen. 'The man was evidently truthful, for there was not motive sufficient for his invention of such a tale, and he could not have done it either.'

Cytherea looked long at her brother. 'Don't you recognize anything else in connection with the story?' she said.

'What?' he asked.

‘Do you remember what poor papa once let drop — that Cytherea was the name of his first sweetheart in Bloomsbury, who so mysteriously renounced him? A sort of intuition tells me that this was the same woman.’

‘O no — not likely,’ said her brother sceptically.

‘How not likely, Owen? There’s not another woman of the name in England. In what year used papa to say the event took place?’

‘Eighteen hundred and thirty-five.’

‘And when were the Houses of Parliament burnt? — stop, I can tell you.’ She searched their little stock of books for a list of dates, and found one in an old school history.

‘The Houses of Parliament were burnt down in the evening of the sixteenth of October, eighteen hundred and thirty-four.’

‘Nearly a year and a quarter before she met father,’ remarked Owen.

They were silent. ‘If papa had been alive, what a wonderful absorbing interest this story would have had for him,’ said Cytherea by-and-by. ‘And how strangely knowledge comes to us. We might have searched for a clue to her secret half the world over, and never found one. If we had really had any motive for trying to discover more of the sad history than papa told us, we should have gone to Bloomsbury; but not caring to do so, we go two hundred miles in the opposite direction, and there find information waiting to be told us. What could have been the secret, Owen?’

‘Heaven knows. But our having heard a little more of her in this way (if she is the same woman) is a mere coincidence after all — a family story to tell our friends if we ever have any. But we shall never know any more of the episode now — trust our fates for that.’

Cytherea sat silently thinking.

‘There was no answer this morning to your advertisement, Cytherea?’ he continued.

‘None.’

‘I could see that by your looks when I came in.’

‘Fancy not getting a single one,’ she said sadly. ‘Surely there must be people somewhere who want governesses?’

‘Yes; but those who want them, and can afford to have them, get them mostly by friends’ recommendations; whilst those who want them, and can’t afford to have them, make use of their poor relations.’

‘What shall I do?’

‘Never mind it. Go on living with me. Don’t let the difficulty trouble your mind so; you think about it all day. I can keep you, Cythie, in a plain way of living. Twenty-five shillings a week do not amount to much truly; but then many mechanics have no more, and we live quite as sparingly as journeymen mechanics... It is a meagre narrow life we are drifting into,’ he added gloomily, ‘but it is a degree more tolerable than the worrying sensation of all the world being ashamed of you, which we experienced at Hocbridge.’

‘I couldn’t go back there again,’ she said.

‘Nor I. O, I don’t regret our course for a moment. We did quite right in dropping out of the world.’ The sneering tones of the remark were almost too laboured to be real. ‘Besides,’ he continued, ‘something better for me is sure to turn up soon. I wish my engagement here was a permanent one instead of for only two months. It may, certainly, be for a longer time, but all is uncertain.’

‘I wish I could get something to do; and I must too,’ she said firmly. ‘Suppose, as is very probable, you are not wanted after the beginning of October — the time Mr. Gradfield mentioned — what should we do if I were dependent on you only throughout the winter?’

They pondered on numerous schemes by which a young lady might be supposed to earn a decent livelihood — more or less convenient and feasible in imagination, but relinquished them all until advertising had been once more tried, this time taking lower ground. Cytherea was vexed at her temerity in having represented to the world that so inexperienced a being as herself was a qualified governess; and had a fancy that this presumption of hers might be one reason why no ladies applied. The new and humbler attempt appeared in the following form: —

‘NURSERY GOVERNESS OR USEFUL COMPANION. A young person wishes to hear of a situation in either of the above capacities. Salary very moderate. She is a good needle-woman — Address G., 3 Cross Street, Budmouth.’

In the evening they went to post the letter, and then walked up and down the Parade for a while. Soon they met Springrove, said a few words to him, and passed on. Owen noticed that his sister’s face had become crimson. Rather oddly they met Springrove again in a few minutes. This time the three walked a little way together, Edward ostensibly talking to Owen, though with a single thought to the reception of his words by the maiden at the farther side, upon whom his gaze was mostly resting, and who was attentively listening — looking fixedly upon the pavement the while. It has been said that men love with their eyes; women with their ears.

As Owen and himself were little more than acquaintances as yet, and as Springrove was wanting in the assurance of many men of his age, it now became necessary to wish his friends good-evening, or to find a reason for continuing near Cytherea by saying some nice new thing. He thought of a new thing; he proposed a pull across the bay. This was assented to. They went to the pier; stepped into one of the gaily painted boats moored alongside and sheered off. Cytherea sat in the stern steering.

They rowed that evening; the next came, and with it the necessity of rowing again. Then the next, and the next, Cytherea always sitting in the stern with the tiller ropes in her hand. The curves of her figure welded with those of the fragile boat in perfect continuation, as she girlishly yielded herself to its heaving and sinking, seeming to form with it an organic whole.

Then Owen was inclined to test his skill in paddling a canoe. Edward did not like canoes, and the issue was, that, having seen Owen on board, Springrove proposed to pull off after him with a pair of sculls; but not considering himself sufficiently

accomplished to do finished rowing before a parade full of promenaders when there was a little swell on, and with the rudder unshipped in addition, he begged that Cytherea might come with him and steer as before. She stepped in, and they floated along in the wake of her brother. Thus passed the fifth evening on the water.

But the sympathetic pair were thrown into still closer companionship, and much more exclusive connection.

2. JULY THE TWENTY-NINTH

It was a sad time for Cytherea — the last day of Springrove's management at Gradfield's, and the last evening before his return from Budmouth to his father's house, previous to his departure for London.

Graye had been requested by the architect to survey a plot of land nearly twenty miles off, which, with the journey to and fro, would occupy him the whole day, and prevent his returning till late in the evening. Cytherea made a companion of her landlady to the extent of sharing meals and sitting with her during the morning of her brother's absence. Mid-day found her restless and miserable under this arrangement. All the afternoon she sat alone, looking out of the window for she scarcely knew whom, and hoping she scarcely knew what. Half-past five o'clock came — the end of Springrove's official day. Two minutes later Springrove walked by.

She endured her solitude for another half-hour, and then could endure no longer. She had hoped — while affecting to fear — that Edward would have found some reason or other for calling, but it seemed that he had not. Hastily dressing herself she went out, when the farce of an accidental meeting was repeated. Edward came upon her in the street at the first turning, and, like the Great Duke Ferdinand in 'The Statue and the Bust' —

'He looked at her as a lover can;

She looked at him as one who awakes —

The past was a sleep, and her life began.'

'Shall we have a boat?' he said impulsively.

How blissful it all is at first. Perhaps, indeed, the only bliss in the course of love which can truly be called Eden-like is that which prevails immediately after doubt has ended and before reflection has set in — at the dawn of the emotion, when it is not recognized by name, and before the consideration of what this love is, has given birth to the consideration of what difficulties it tends to create; when on the man's part, the mistress appears to the mind's eye in picturesque, hazy, and fresh morning lights, and soft morning shadows; when, as yet, she is known only as the wearer of one dress, which shares her own personality; as the stander in one special position, the giver of one bright particular glance, and the speaker of one tender sentence; when, on her part, she is timidly careful over what she says and does, lest she should be misconstrued or under-rated to the breadth of a shadow of a hair.

'Shall we have a boat?' he said again, more softly, seeing that to his first question she had not answered, but looked uncertainly at the ground, then almost, but not

quite, in his face, blushed a series of minute blushes, left off in the midst of them, and showed the usual signs of perplexity in a matter of the emotions.

Owen had always been with her before, but there was now a force of habit in the proceeding, and with Arcadian innocence she assumed that a row on the water was, under any circumstances, a natural thing. Without another word being spoken on either side, they went down the steps. He carefully handed her in, took his seat, slid noiselessly off the sand, and away from the shore.

They thus sat facing each other in the graceful yellow cockle-shell, and his eyes frequently found a resting-place in the depths of hers. The boat was so small that at each return of the sculls, when his hands came forward to begin the pull, they approached so near to her that her vivid imagination began to thrill her with a fancy that he was going to clasp his arms round her. The sensation grew so strong that she could not run the risk of again meeting his eyes at those critical moments, and turned aside to inspect the distant horizon; then she grew weary of looking sideways, and was driven to return to her natural position again. At this instant he again leant forward to begin, and met her glance by an ardent fixed gaze. An involuntary impulse of girlish embarrassment caused her to give a vehement pull at the tiller-rope, which brought the boat's head round till they stood directly for shore.

His eyes, which had dwelt upon her form during the whole time of her look askance, now left her; he perceived the direction in which they were going.

'Why, you have completely turned the boat, Miss Graye?' he said, looking over his shoulder. 'Look at our track on the water — a great semicircle, preceded by a series of zigzags as far as we can see.'

She looked attentively. 'Is it my fault or yours?' she inquired. 'Mine, I suppose?'

'I can't help saying that it is yours.'

She dropped the ropes decisively, feeling the slightest twinge of vexation at the answer.

'Why do you let go?'

'I do it so badly.'

'O no; you turned about for shore in a masterly way. Do you wish to return?'

'Yes, if you please.'

'Of course, then, I will at once.'

'I fear what the people will think of us — going in such absurd directions, and all through my wretched steering.'

'Never mind what the people think.' A pause. 'You surely are not so weak as to mind what the people think on such a matter as that?'

Those words might almost be called too firm and hard to be given by him to her; but never mind. For almost the first time in her life she felt the charming sensation, although on such an insignificant subject, of being compelled into an opinion by a man she loved. Owen, though less yielding physically, and more practical, would not have had the intellectual independence to answer a woman thus. She replied quietly and honestly — as honestly as when she had stated the contrary fact a minute earlier —

‘I don’t mind.’

‘I’ll unship the tiller that you may have nothing to do going back but to hold your parasol,’ he continued, and arose to perform the operation, necessarily leaning closely against her, to guard against the risk of capsizing the boat as he reached his hands astern. His warm breath touched and crept round her face like a caress; but he was apparently only concerned with his task. She looked guilty of something when he seated himself. He read in her face what that something was — she had experienced a pleasure from his touch. But he flung a practical glance over his shoulder, seized the oars, and they sped in a straight line towards the shore.

Cytherea saw that he noted in her face what had passed in her heart, and that noting it, he continued as decided as before. She was inwardly distressed. She had not meant him to translate her words about returning home so literally at the first; she had not intended him to learn her secret; but more than all she was not able to endure the perception of his learning it and continuing unmoved.

There was nothing but misery to come now. They would step ashore; he would say good-night, go to London to-morrow, and the miserable She would lose him for ever. She did not quite suppose what was the fact, that a parallel thought was simultaneously passing through his mind.

They were now within ten yards, now within five; he was only now waiting for a ‘smooth’ to bring the boat in. Sweet, sweet Love must not be slain thus, was the fair maid’s reasoning. She was equal to the occasion — ladies are — and delivered the god —

‘Do you want very much to land, Mr. Springrove?’ she said, letting her young violet eyes pine at him a very, very little.

‘I? Not at all,’ said he, looking an astonishment at her inquiry which a slight twinkle of his eye half belied. ‘But you do?’

‘I think that now we have come out, and it is such a pleasant evening,’ she said gently and sweetly, ‘I should like a little longer row if you don’t mind? I’ll try to steer better than before if it makes it easier for you. I’ll try very hard.’

It was the turn of his face to tell a tale now. He looked, ‘We understand each other — ah, we do, darling!’ turned the boat, and pulled back into the Bay once more.

‘Now steer wherever you will,’ he said, in a low voice. ‘Never mind the directness of the course — wherever you will.’

‘Shall it be Creston Shore?’ she said, pointing to a stretch of beach northward from Budmouth Esplanade.

‘Creston Shore certainly,’ he responded, grasping the sculls. She took the strings daintily, and they wound away to the left.

For a long time nothing was audible in the boat but the regular dip of the oars, and their movement in the rowlocks. Springrove at length spoke.

‘I must go away to-morrow,’ he said tentatively.

‘Yes,’ she replied faintly.

‘To endeavour to advance a little in my profession in London.’

‘Yes,’ she said again, with the same preoccupied softness.

‘But I shan’t advance.’

‘Why not? Architecture is a bewitching profession. They say that an architect’s work is another man’s play.’

‘Yes. But worldly advantage from an art doesn’t depend upon mastering it. I used to think it did; but it doesn’t. Those who get rich need have no skill at all as artists.’

‘What need they have?’

‘A certain kind of energy which men with any fondness for art possess very seldom indeed — an earnestness in making acquaintances, and a love for using them. They give their whole attention to the art of dining out, after mastering a few rudimentary facts to serve up in conversation. Now after saying that, do I seem a man likely to make a name?’

‘You seem a man likely to make a mistake.’

‘What’s that?’

‘To give too much room to the latent feeling which is rather common in these days among the unappreciated, that because some remarkably successful men are fools, all remarkably unsuccessful men are geniuses.’

‘Pretty subtle for a young lady,’ he said slowly. ‘From that remark I should fancy you had bought experience.’

She passed over the idea. ‘Do try to succeed,’ she said, with wistful thoughtfulness, leaving her eyes on him.

Springrove flushed a little at the earnestness of her words, and mused. ‘Then, like Cato the Censor, I shall do what I despise, to be in the fashion,’ he said at last... ‘Well, when I found all this out that I was speaking of, what ever do you think I did? From having already loved verse passionately, I went on to read it continually; then I went rhyming myself. If anything on earth ruins a man for useful occupation, and for content with reasonable success in a profession or trade, it is the habit of writing verses on emotional subjects, which had much better be left to die from want of nourishment.’

‘Do you write poems now?’ she said.

‘None. Poetical days are getting past with me, according to the usual rule. Writing rhymes is a stage people of my sort pass through, as they pass through the stage of shaving for a beard, or thinking they are ill-used, or saying there’s nothing in the world worth living for.’

‘Then the difference between a common man and a recognized poet is, that one has been deluded, and cured of his delusion, and the other continues deluded all his days.’

‘Well, there’s just enough truth in what you say, to make the remark unbearable. However, it doesn’t matter to me now that I “meditate the thankless Muse” no longer, but...’ He paused, as if endeavouring to think what better thing he did.

Cytherea’s mind ran on to the succeeding lines of the poem, and their startling harmony with the present situation suggested the fancy that he was ‘sporting’ with her, and brought an awkward contemplativeness to her face.

Springrove guessed her thoughts, and in answer to them simply said 'Yes.' Then they were silent again.

'If I had known an Amaryllis was coming here, I should not have made arrangements for leaving,' he resumed.

Such levity, superimposed on the notion of 'sport', was intolerable to Cytherea; for a woman seems never to see any but the serious side of her attachment, though the most devoted lover has all the time a vague and dim perception that he is losing his old dignity and frittering away his time.

'But will you not try again to get on in your profession? Try once more; do try once more,' she murmured. 'I am going to try again. I have advertised for something to do.'

'Of course I will,' he said, with an eager gesture and smile. 'But we must remember that the fame of Christopher Wren himself depended upon the accident of a fire in Pudding Lane. My successes seem to come very slowly. I often think, that before I am ready to live, it will be time for me to die. However, I am trying — not for fame now, but for an easy life of reasonable comfort.'

It is a melancholy truth for the middle classes, that in proportion as they develop, by the study of poetry and art, their capacity for conjugal love of the highest and purest kind, they limit the possibility of their being able to exercise it — the very act putting out of their power the attainment of means sufficient for marriage. The man who works up a good income has had no time to learn love to its solemn extreme; the man who has learnt that has had no time to get rich.

'And if you should fail — utterly fail to get that reasonable wealth,' she said earnestly, 'don't be perturbed. The truly great stand upon no middle ledge; they are either famous or unknown.'

'Unknown,' he said, 'if their ideas have been allowed to flow with a sympathetic breadth. Famous only if they have been convergent and exclusive.'

'Yes; and I am afraid from that, that my remark was but discouragement, wearing the dress of comfort. Perhaps I was not quite right in —'

'It depends entirely upon what is meant by being truly great. But the long and the short of the matter is, that men must stick to a thing if they want to succeed in it — not giving way to over-much admiration for the flowers they see growing in other people's borders; which I am afraid has been my case.' He looked into the far distance and paused.

Adherence to a course with persistence sufficient to ensure success is possible to widely appreciative minds only when there is also found in them a power — commonplace in its nature, but rare in such combination — the power of assuming to conviction that in the outlying paths which appear so much more brilliant than their own, there are bitternesses equally great — unperceived simply on account of their remoteness.

They were opposite Ringsworth Shore. The cliffs here were formed of strata completely contrasting with those of the further side of the Bay, whilst in and beneath the water hard boulders had taken the place of sand and shingle, between which, however, the sea glided noiselessly, without breaking the crest of a single wave, so strikingly

calm was the air. The breeze had entirely died away, leaving the water of that rare glassy smoothness which is unmarked even by the small dimples of the least aerial movement. Purples and blues of divers shades were reflected from this mirror accordingly as each undulation sloped east or west. They could see the rocky bottom some twenty feet beneath them, luxuriant with weeds of various growths, and dotted with pulpy creatures reflecting a silvery and spangled radiance upwards to their eyes.

At length she looked at him to learn the effect of her words of encouragement. He had let the oars drift alongside, and the boat had come to a standstill. Everything on earth seemed taking a contemplative rest, as if waiting to hear the avowal of something from his lips. At that instant he appeared to break a resolution hitherto zealously kept. Leaving his seat amidships he came and gently edged himself down beside her upon the narrow seat at the stern.

She breathed more quickly and warmly: he took her right hand in his own right: it was not withdrawn. He put his left hand behind her neck till it came round upon her left cheek: it was not thrust away. Lightly pressing her, he brought her face and mouth towards his own; when, at this the very brink, some unaccountable thought or spell within him suddenly made him halt — even now, and as it seemed as much to himself as to her, he timidly whispered ‘May I?’

Her endeavour was to say No, so denuded of its flesh and sinews that its nature would hardly be recognized, or in other words a No from so near the affirmative frontier as to be affected with the Yes accent. It was thus a whispered No, drawn out to nearly a quarter of a minute’s length, the O making itself audible as a sound like the spring coo of a pigeon on unusually friendly terms with its mate. Though conscious of her success in producing the kind of word she had wished to produce, she at the same time trembled in suspense as to how it would be taken. But the time available for doubt was so short as to admit of scarcely more than half a pulsation: pressing closer he kissed her. Then he kissed her again with a longer kiss.

It was the supremely happy moment of their experience. The ‘bloom’ and the ‘purple light’ were strong on the lineaments of both. Their hearts could hardly believe the evidence of their lips.

‘I love you, and you love me, Cytherea!’ he whispered.

She did not deny it; and all seemed well. The gentle sounds around them from the hills, the plains, the distant town, the adjacent shore, the water heaving at their side, the kiss, and the long kiss, were all ‘many a voice of one delight,’ and in unison with each other.

But his mind flew back to the same unpleasant thought which had been connected with the resolution he had broken a minute or two earlier. ‘I could be a slave at my profession to win you, Cytherea; I would work at the meanest, honest trade to be near you — much less claim you as mine; I would — anything. But I have not told you all; it is not this; you don’t know what there is yet to tell. Could you forgive as you can love?’ She was alarmed to see that he had become pale with the question.

‘No — do not speak,’ he said. ‘I have kept something from you, which has now become the cause of a great uneasiness. I had no right — to love you; but I did it. Something forbade — ’

‘What?’ she exclaimed.

‘Something forbade me — till the kiss — yes, till the kiss came; and now nothing shall forbid it! We’ll hope in spite of all... I must, however, speak of this love of ours to your brother. Dearest, you had better go indoors whilst I meet him at the station, and explain everything.’

Cytherea’s short-lived bliss was dead and gone. O, if she had known of this sequel would she have allowed him to break down the barrier of mere acquaintanceship — never, never!

‘Will you not explain to me?’ she faintly urged. Doubt — indefinite, carking doubt had taken possession of her.

‘Not now. You alarm yourself unnecessarily,’ he said tenderly. ‘My only reason for keeping silence is that with my present knowledge I may tell an untrue story. It may be that there is nothing to tell. I am to blame for haste in alluding to any such thing. Forgive me, sweet — forgive me.’ Her heart was ready to burst, and she could not answer him. He returned to his place and took to the oars.

They again made for the distant Esplanade, now, with its line of houses, lying like a dark grey band against the light western sky. The sun had set, and a star or two began to peep out. They drew nearer their destination, Edward as he pulled tracing listlessly with his eyes the red stripes upon her scarf, which grew to appear as black ones in the increasing dusk of evening. She surveyed the long line of lamps on the seawall of the town, now looking small and yellow, and seeming to send long tap-roots of fire quivering down deep into the sea. By-and-by they reached the landing-steps. He took her hand as before, and found it as cold as the water about them. It was not relinquished till he reached her door. His assurance had not removed the constraint of her manner: he saw that she blamed him mutely and with her eyes, like a captured sparrow. Left alone, he went and seated himself in a chair on the Esplanade.

Neither could she go indoors to her solitary room, feeling as she did in such a state of desperate heaviness. When Springrove was out of sight she turned back, and arrived at the corner just in time to see him sit down. Then she glided pensively along the pavement behind him, forgetting herself to marble like Melancholy herself as she mused in his neighbourhood unseen. She heard, without heeding, the notes of pianos and singing voices from the fashionable houses at her back, from the open windows of which the lamp-light streamed to join that of the orange-hued full moon, newly risen over the Bay in front. Then Edward began to pace up and down, and Cytherea, fearing that he would notice her, hastened homeward, flinging him a last look as she passed out of sight. No promise from him to write: no request that she herself would do so — nothing but an indefinite expression of hope in the face of some fear unknown to her. Alas, alas!

When Owen returned he found she was not in the small sitting-room, and creeping upstairs into her bedroom with a light, he discovered her there lying asleep upon the coverlet of the bed, still with her hat and jacket on. She had flung herself down on entering, and succumbed to the unwonted oppressiveness that ever attends full-blown love. The wet traces of tears were yet visible upon her long drooping lashes.

‘Love is a sowre delight, and sugred grieve,
A living death, and ever-dying life.’

‘Cytherea,’ he whispered, kissing her. She awoke with a start, and vented an exclamation before recovering her judgment. ‘He’s gone!’ she said.

‘He has told me all,’ said Graye soothingly. ‘He is going off early to-morrow morning. ‘Twas a shame of him to win you away from me, and cruel of you to keep the growth of this attachment a secret.’

‘We couldn’t help it,’ she said, and then jumping up — ‘Owen, has he told you all?’
‘All of your love from beginning to end,’ he said simply.

Edward then had not told more — as he ought to have done: yet she could not convict him. But she would struggle against his fetters. She tingled to the very soles of her feet at the very possibility that he might be deluding her.

‘Owen,’ she continued, with dignity, ‘what is he to me? Nothing. I must dismiss such weakness as this — believe me, I will. Something far more pressing must drive it away. I have been looking my position steadily in the face, and I must get a living somehow. I mean to advertise once more.’

‘Advertising is no use.’

‘This one will be.’ He looked surprised at the sanguine tone of her answer, till she took a piece of paper from the table and showed it him. ‘See what I am going to do,’ she said sadly, almost bitterly. This was her third effort: —

‘LADY’S-MAID. Inexperienced. Age eighteen. — G., 3 Cross Street,
Budmouth.’

Owen — Owen the respectable — looked blank astonishment. He repeated in a nameless, varying tone, the two words —

‘Lady’s-maid!’

‘Yes; lady’s-maid. ‘Tis an honest profession,’ said Cytherea bravely.

‘But you, Cytherea?’

‘Yes, I — who am I?’

‘You will never be a lady’s-maid — never, I am quite sure.’

‘I shall try to be, at any rate.’

‘Such a disgrace — ’

‘Nonsense! I maintain that it is no disgrace!’ she said, rather warmly. ‘You know very well — ’

‘Well, since you will, you must,’ he interrupted. ‘Why do you put “inexperienced?”’

‘Because I am.’

‘Never mind that — scratch out “inexperienced.” We are poor, Cytherea, aren’t we?’ he murmured, after a silence, ‘and it seems that the two months will close my engagement here.’

‘We can put up with being poor,’ she said, ‘if they only give us work to do... Yes, we desire as a blessing what was given us as a curse, and even that is denied. However, be cheerful, Owen, and never mind!’

In justice to desponding men, it is as well to remember that the brighter endurance of women at these epochs — invaluable, sweet, angelic, as it is — owes more of its origin to a narrower vision that shuts out many of the leaden-eyed despairs in the van, than to a hopefulness intense enough to quell them.

IV. THE EVENTS OF ONE DAY

1. AUGUST THE FOURTH. TILL FOUR O’CLOCK

The early part of the next week brought an answer to Cytherea’s last note of hope in the way of advertisement — not from a distance of hundreds of miles, London, Scotland, Ireland, the Continent — as Cytherea seemed to think it must, to be in keeping with the means adopted for obtaining it, but from a place in the neighbourhood of that in which she was living — a country mansion not twenty miles off. The reply ran thus:

—
KNAPWATER HOUSE,
August 3, 1864.

‘Miss Aldclyffe is in want of a young person as lady’s-maid. The duties of the place are light. Miss Aldclyffe will be in Budmouth on Thursday, when (should G. still not have heard of a place) she would like to see her at the Belvedere Hotel, Esplanade, at four o’clock. No answer need be returned to this note.’

A little earlier than the time named, Cytherea, clothed in a modest bonnet, and a black silk jacket, turned down to the hotel. Expectation, the fresh air from the water, the bright, far-extending outlook, raised the most delicate of pink colours to her cheeks, and restored to her tread a portion of that elasticity which her past troubles, and thoughts of Edward, had well-nigh taken away.

She entered the vestibule, and went to the window of the bar.

‘Is Miss Aldclyffe here?’ she said to a nicely-dressed barmaid in the foreground, who was talking to a landlady covered with chains, knobs, and clamps of gold, in the background.

‘No, she isn’t,’ said the barmaid, not very civilly. Cytherea looked a shade too pretty for a plain dresser.

‘Miss Aldclyffe is expected here,’ the landlady said to a third person, out of sight, in the tone of one who had known for several days the fact newly discovered from Cytherea. ‘Get ready her room — be quick.’ From the alacrity with which the order

was given and taken, it seemed to Cytherea that Miss Aldclyffe must be a woman of considerable importance.

‘You are to have an interview with Miss Aldclyffe here?’ the landlady inquired.

‘Yes.’

‘The young person had better wait,’ continued the landlady. With a money-taker’s intuition she had rightly divined that Cytherea would bring no profit to the house.

Cytherea was shown into a nondescript chamber, on the shady side of the building, which appeared to be either bedroom or dayroom, as occasion necessitated, and was one of a suite at the end of the first-floor corridor. The prevailing colour of the walls, curtains, carpet, and coverings of furniture, was more or less blue, to which the cold light coming from the north easterly sky, and falling on a wide roof of new slates — the only object the small window commanded — imparted a more striking paleness. But underneath the door, communicating with the next room of the suite, gleamed an infinitesimally small, yet very powerful, fraction of contrast — a very thin line of ruddy light, showing that the sun beamed strongly into this room adjoining. The line of radiance was the only cheering thing visible in the place.

People give way to very infantine thoughts and actions when they wait; the battlefield of life is temporarily fenced off by a hard and fast line — the interview. Cytherea fixed her eyes idly upon the streak, and began picturing a wonderful paradise on the other side as the source of such a beam — reminding her of the well-known good deed in a naughty world.

Whilst she watched the particles of dust floating before the brilliant chink she heard a carriage and horses stop opposite the front of the house. Afterwards came the rustle of a lady’s skirts down the corridor, and into the room communicating with the one Cytherea occupied.

The golden line vanished in parts like the phosphorescent streak caused by the striking of a match; there was the fall of a light footstep on the floor just behind it: then a pause. Then the foot tapped impatiently, and ‘There’s no one here!’ was spoken imperiously by a lady’s tongue.

‘No, madam; in the next room. I am going to fetch her,’ said the attendant.

‘That will do — or you needn’t go in; I will call her.’

Cytherea had risen, and she advanced to the middle door with the chink under it as the servant retired. She had just laid her hand on the knob, when it slipped round within her fingers, and the door was pulled open from the other side.

2. FOUR O’CLOCK

The direct blaze of the afternoon sun, partly refracted through the crimson curtains of the window, and heightened by reflections from the crimson-flock paper which covered the walls, and a carpet on the floor of the same tint, shone with a burning glow round the form of a lady standing close to Cytherea’s front with the door in her hand. The stranger appeared to the maiden’s eyes — fresh from the blue gloom, and assisted by an imagination fresh from nature — like a tall black figure standing in the midst of fire. It was the figure of a finely-built woman, of spare though not angular proportions.

Cytherea involuntarily shaded her eyes with her hand, retreated a step or two, and then she could for the first time see Miss Aldclyffe's face in addition to her outline, lit up by the secondary and softer light that was reflected from the varnished panels of the door. She was not a very young woman, but could boast of much beauty of the majestic autumnal phase.

'O,' said the lady, 'come this way.' Cytherea followed her to the embrasure of the window.

Both the women showed off themselves to advantage as they walked forward in the orange light; and each showed too in her face that she had been struck with her companion's appearance. The warm tint added to Cytherea's face a voluptuousness which youth and a simple life had not yet allowed to express itself there ordinarily; whilst in the elder lady's face it reduced the customary expression, which might have been called sternness, if not harshness, to grandeur, and warmed her decaying complexion with much of the youthful richness it plainly had once possessed.

She appeared now no more than five-and-thirty, though she might easily have been ten or a dozen years older. She had clear steady eyes, a Roman nose in its purest form, and also the round prominent chin with which the Caesars are represented in ancient marbles; a mouth expressing a capability for and tendency to strong emotion, habitually controlled by pride. There was a severity about the lower outlines of the face which gave a masculine cast to this portion of her countenance. Womanly weakness was nowhere visible save in one part — the curve of her forehead and brows — there it was clear and emphatic. She wore a lace shawl over a brown silk dress, and a net bonnet set with a few blue cornflowers.

'You inserted the advertisement for a situation as lady's-maid giving the address, G., Cross Street?'

'Yes, madam. Graye.'

'Yes. I have heard your name — Mrs. Morris, my housekeeper, mentioned you, and pointed out your advertisement.'

This was puzzling intelligence, but there was not time enough to consider it.

'Where did you live last?' continued Miss Aldclyffe.

'I have never been a servant before. I lived at home.'

'Never been out? I thought too at sight of you that you were too girlish-looking to have done much. But why did you advertise with such assurance? It misleads people.'

'I am very sorry: I put "inexperienced" at first, but my brother said it is absurd to trumpet your own weakness to the world, and would not let it remain.'

'But your mother knew what was right, I suppose?'

'I have no mother, madam.'

'Your father, then?'

'I have no father.'

'Well,' she said, more softly, 'your sisters, aunts, or cousins.'

'They didn't think anything about it.'

'You didn't ask them, I suppose.'

‘No.’

‘You should have done so, then. Why didn’t you?’

‘Because I haven’t any of them, either.’

Miss Aldclyffe showed her surprise. ‘You deserve forgiveness then at any rate, child,’ she said, in a sort of drily-kind tone. ‘However, I am afraid you do not suit me, as I am looking for an elderly person. You see, I want an experienced maid who knows all the usual duties of the office.’ She was going to add, ‘Though I like your appearance,’ but the words seemed offensive to apply to the ladylike girl before her, and she modified them to, ‘though I like you much.’

‘I am sorry I misled you, madam,’ said Cytherea.

Miss Aldclyffe stood in a reverie, without replying.

‘Good afternoon,’ continued Cytherea.

‘Good-bye, Miss Graye — I hope you will succeed.’

Cytherea turned away towards the door. The movement chanced to be one of her masterpieces. It was precise: it had as much beauty as was compatible with precision, and as little coquettishness as was compatible with beauty.

And she had in turning looked over her shoulder at the other lady with a faint accent of reproach in her face. Those who remember Greuze’s ‘Head of a Girl,’ have an idea of Cytherea’s look askance at the turning. It is not for a man to tell fishers of men how to set out their fascinations so as to bring about the highest possible average of takes within the year: but the action that tugs the hardest of all at an emotional beholder is this sweet method of turning which steals the bosom away and leaves the eyes behind.

Now Miss Aldclyffe herself was no tyro at wheeling. When Cytherea had closed the door upon her, she remained for some time in her motionless attitude, listening to the gradually dying sound of the maiden’s retreating footsteps. She murmured to herself, ‘It is almost worth while to be bored with instructing her in order to have a creature who could glide round my luxurious indolent body in that manner, and look at me in that way — I warrant how light her fingers are upon one’s head and neck... What a silly modest young thing she is, to go away so suddenly as that!’ She rang the bell.

‘Ask the young lady who has just left me to step back again,’ she said to the attendant. ‘Quick! or she will be gone.’

Cytherea was now in the vestibule, thinking that if she had told her history, Miss Aldclyffe might perhaps have taken her into the household; yet her history she particularly wished to conceal from a stranger. When she was recalled she turned back without feeling much surprise. Something, she knew not what, told her she had not seen the last of Miss Aldclyffe.

‘You have somebody to refer me to, of course,’ the lady said, when Cytherea had re-entered the room.

‘Yes: Mr. Thorn, a solicitor at Aldbrickham.’

‘And are you a clever needlewoman?’

‘I am considered to be.’

‘Then I think that at any rate I will write to Mr. Thorn,’ said Miss Aldclyffe, with a little smile. ‘It is true, the whole proceeding is very irregular; but my present maid leaves next Monday, and neither of the five I have already seen seem to do for me... Well, I will write to Mr. Thorn, and if his reply is satisfactory, you shall hear from me. It will be as well to set yourself in readiness to come on Monday.’

When Cytherea had again been watched out of the room, Miss Aldclyffe asked for writing materials, that she might at once communicate with Mr. Thorn. She indecisively played with the pen. ‘Suppose Mr. Thorn’s reply to be in any way disheartening — and even if so from his own imperfect acquaintance with the young creature more than from circumstantial knowledge — I shall feel obliged to give her up. Then I shall regret that I did not give her one trial in spite of other people’s prejudices. All her account of herself is reliable enough — yes, I can see that by her face. I like that face of hers.’

Miss Aldclyffe put down the pen and left the hotel without writing to Mr. Thorn.

V. THE EVENTS OF ONE DAY

1. AUGUST THE EIGHTH. MORNING AND AFTERNOON

At post-time on that following Monday morning, Cytherea watched so anxiously for the postman, that as the time which must bring him narrowed less and less her vivid expectation had only a degree less tangibility than his presence itself. In another second his form came into view. He brought two letters for Cytherea.

One from Miss Aldclyffe, simply stating that she wished Cytherea to come on trial: that she would require her to be at Knapwater House by Monday evening.

The other was from Edward Springrove. He told her that she was the bright spot of his life: that her existence was far dearer to him than his own: that he had never known what it was to love till he had met her. True, he had felt passing attachments to other faces from time to time; but they all had been weak inclinations towards those faces as they then appeared. He loved her past and future, as well as her present. He pictured her as a child: he loved her. He pictured her of sage years: he loved her. He pictured her in trouble; he loved her. Homely friendship entered into his love for her, without which all love was evanescent.

He would make one depressing statement. Uncontrollable circumstances (a long history, with which it was impossible to acquaint her at present) operated to a certain extent as a drag upon his wishes. He had felt this more strongly at the time of their parting than he did now — and it was the cause of his abrupt behaviour, for which he begged her to forgive him. He saw now an honourable way of freeing himself, and the perception had prompted him to write. In the meantime might he indulge in the hope of possessing her on some bright future day, when by hard labour generated from her own encouraging words, he had placed himself in a position she would think worthy to be shared with him?

Dear little letter; she huddled it up. So much more important a love-letter seems to a girl than to a man. Springrove was unconsciously clever in his letters, and a man with a talent of that kind may write himself up to a hero in the mind of a young woman who loves him without knowing much about him. Springrove already stood a cubit higher in her imagination than he did in his shoes.

During the day she flitted about the room in an ecstasy of pleasure, packing the things and thinking of an answer which should be worthy of the tender tone of the question, her love bubbling from her involuntarily, like prophesyings from a prophet.

In the afternoon Owen went with her to the railway-station, and put her in the train for Carriford Road, the station nearest to Knapwater House.

Half-an-hour later she stepped out upon the platform, and found nobody there to receive her — though a pony-carriage was waiting outside. In two minutes she saw a melancholy man in cheerful livery running towards her from a public-house close adjoining, who proved to be the servant sent to fetch her. There are two ways of getting rid of sorrows: one by living them down, the other by drowning them. The coachman drowned his.

He informed her that her luggage would be fetched by a spring-waggon in about half-an-hour; then helped her into the chaise and drove off.

Her lover's letter, lying close against her neck, fortified her against the restless timidity she had previously felt concerning this new undertaking, and completely furnished her with the confident ease of mind which is required for the critical observation of surrounding objects. It was just that stage in the slow decline of the summer days, when the deep, dark, and vacuous hot-weather shadows are beginning to be replaced by blue ones that have a surface and substance to the eye. They trotted along the turnpike road for a distance of about a mile, which brought them just outside the village of Carriford, and then turned through large lodge-gates, on the heavy stone piers of which stood a pair of bitterns cast in bronze. They then entered the park and wound along a drive shaded by old and drooping lime-trees, not arranged in the form of an avenue, but standing irregularly, sometimes leaving the track completely exposed to the sky, at other times casting a shade over it, which almost approached gloom — the under surface of the lowest boughs hanging at a uniform level of six feet above the grass — the extreme height to which the nibbling mouths of the cattle could reach.

'Is that the house?' said Cytherea expectantly, catching sight of a grey gable between the trees, and losing it again.

'No; that's the old manor-house — or rather all that's left of it. The Aldycliffes used to let it sometimes, but it was oftener empty. 'Tis now divided into three cottages. Respectable people didn't care to live there.'

'Why didn't they?'

'Well, 'tis so awkward and unhandy. You see so much of it has been pulled down, and the rooms that are left won't do very well for a small residence. 'Tis so dismal, too, and like most old houses stands too low down in the hollow to be healthy.'

'Do they tell any horrid stories about it?'

‘No, not a single one.’

‘Ah, that’s a pity.’

‘Yes, that’s what I say. ‘Tis jest the house for a nice ghastly hair-on-end story, that would make the parish religious. Perhaps it will have one some day to make it complete; but there’s not a word of the kind now. There, I wouldn’t live there for all that. In fact, I couldn’t. O no, I couldn’t.’

‘Why couldn’t you?’

‘The sounds.’

‘What are they?’

‘One is the waterfall, which stands so close by that you can hear that there waterfall in every room of the house, night or day, ill or well. ‘Tis enough to drive anybody mad: now hark.’

He stopped the horse. Above the slight common sounds in the air came the unvarying steady rush of falling water from some spot unseen on account of the thick foliage of the grove.

‘There’s something awful in the timing o’ that sound, ain’t there, miss?’

‘When you say there is, there really seems to be. You said there were two — what is the other horrid sound?’

‘The pumping-engine. That’s close by the Old House, and sends water up the hill and all over the Great House. We shall hear that directly... There, now hark again.’

From the same direction down the dell they could now hear the whistling creak of cranks, repeated at intervals of half-a-minute, with a sousing noise between each: a creak, a souse, then another creak, and so on continually.

‘Now if anybody could make shift to live through the other sounds, these would finish him off, don’t you think so, miss? That machine goes on night and day, summer and winter, and is hardly ever greased or visited. Ah, it tries the nerves at night, especially if you are not very well; though we don’t often hear it at the Great House.’

‘That sound is certainly very dismal. They might have the wheel greased. Does Miss Aldclyffe take any interest in these things?’

‘Well, scarcely; you see her father doesn’t attend to that sort of thing as he used to. The engine was once quite his hobby. But now he’s gotten old and very seldom goes there.’

‘How many are there in family?’

‘Only her father and herself. He’s a’ old man of seventy.’

‘I had thought that Miss Aldclyffe was sole mistress of the property, and lived here alone.’

‘No, m — ’ The coachman was continually checking himself thus, being about to style her miss involuntarily, and then recollecting that he was only speaking to the new lady’s-maid.

‘She will soon be mistress, however, I am afraid,’ he continued, as if speaking by a spirit of prophecy denied to ordinary humanity. ‘The poor old gentleman has decayed very fast lately.’ The man then drew a long breath.

‘Why did you breathe sadly like that?’ said Cytherea.

‘Ah!... When he’s dead peace will be all over with us old servants. I expect to see the old house turned inside out.’

‘She will marry, do you mean?’

‘Marry — not she! I wish she would. No, in her soul she’s as solitary as Robinson Crusoe, though she has acquaintances in plenty, if not relations. There’s the rector, Mr. Raunham — he’s a relation by marriage — yet she’s quite distant towards him. And people say that if she keeps single there will be hardly a life between Mr. Raunham and the heirship of the estate. Dang it, she don’t care. She’s an extraordinary picture of womankind — very extraordinary.’

‘In what way besides?’

‘You’ll know soon enough, miss. She has had seven lady’s-maids this last twelve-month. I assure you ‘tis one body’s work to fetch ‘em from the station and take ‘em back again. The Lord must be a neglectful party at heart, or he’d never permit such overbearen goings on!’

‘Does she dismiss them directly they come!’

‘Not at all — she never dismisses them — they go theirselves. Ye see ‘tis like this. She’s got a very quick temper; she flees in a passion with them for nothing at all; next mornen they come up and say they are going; she’s sorry for it and wishes they’d stay, but she’s as proud as a lucifer, and her pride won’t let her say, “Stay,” and away they go. ‘Tis like this in fact. If you say to her about anybody, “Ah, poor thing!” she says, “Pooh! indeed!” If you say, “Pooh, indeed!” “Ah, poor thing!” she says directly. She hangs the chief baker, as mid be, and restores the chief butler, as mid be, though the devil but Pharaoh herself can see the difference between ‘em.’

Cytherea was silent. She feared she might be again a burden to her brother.

‘However, you stand a very good chance,’ the man went on, ‘for I think she likes you more than common. I have never known her send the pony-carriage to meet one before; ‘tis always the trap, but this time she said, in a very particular ladylike tone, “Roobert, gaow with the pony-kerriage.”... There, ‘tis true, pony and carriage too are gotten rather shabby now,’ he added, looking round upon the vehicle as if to keep Cytherea’s pride within reasonable limits.

‘‘Tis to be hoped you’ll please in dresen her to-night.’

‘Why to-night?’

‘There’s a dinner-party of seventeen; ‘tis her father’s birthday, and she’s very particular about her looks at such times. Now see; this is the house. Livelier up here, isn’t it, miss?’

They were now on rising ground, and had just emerged from a clump of trees. Still a little higher than where they stood was situated the mansion, called Knapwater House, the offices gradually losing themselves among the trees behind.

2. EVENING

The house was regularly and substantially built of clean grey freestone throughout, in that plainer fashion of Greek classicism which prevailed at the latter end of the last

century, when the copyists called designers had grown weary of fantastic variations in the Roman orders. The main block approximated to a square on the ground plan, having a projection in the centre of each side, surmounted by a pediment. From each angle of the inferior side ran a line of buildings lower than the rest, turning inwards again at their further end, and forming within them a spacious open court, within which resounded an echo of astonishing clearness. These erections were in their turn backed by ivy-covered ice-houses, laundries, and stables, the whole mass of subsidiary buildings being half buried beneath close-set shrubs and trees.

There was opening sufficient through the foliage on the right hand to enable her on nearer approach to form an idea of the arrangement of the remoter or lawn front also. The natural features and contour of this quarter of the site had evidently dictated the position of the house primarily, and were of the ordinary, and upon the whole, most satisfactory kind, namely, a broad, graceful slope running from the terrace beneath the walls to the margin of a placid lake lying below, upon the surface of which a dozen swans and a green punt floated at leisure. An irregular wooded island stood in the midst of the lake; beyond this and the further margin of the water were plantations and greensward of varied outlines, the trees heightening, by half veiling, the softness of the exquisite landscape stretching behind.

The glimpses she had obtained of this portion were now checked by the angle of the building. In a minute or two they reached the side door, at which Cytherea alighted. She was welcomed by an elderly woman of lengthy smiles and general pleasantness, who announced herself to be Mrs. Morris, the housekeeper.

‘Mrs. Graye, I believe?’ she said.

‘I am not — O yes, yes, we are all mistresses,’ said Cytherea, smiling, but forcedly. The title accorded her seemed disagreeably like the first slight scar of a brand, and she thought of Owen’s prophecy.

Mrs. Morris led her into a comfortable parlour called The Room. Here tea was made ready, and Cytherea sat down, looking, whenever occasion allowed, at Mrs. Morris with great interest and curiosity, to discover, if possible, something in her which should give a clue to the secret of her knowledge of herself, and the recommendation based upon it. But nothing was to be learnt, at any rate just then. Mrs. Morris was perpetually getting up, feeling in her pockets, going to cupboards, leaving the room two or three minutes, and trotting back again.

‘You’ll excuse me, Mrs. Graye,’ she said, ‘but ‘tis the old gentleman’s birthday, and they always have a lot of people to dinner on that day, though he’s getting up in years now. However, none of them are sleepers — she generally keeps the house pretty clear of lodgers (being a lady with no intimate friends, though many acquaintances), which, though it gives us less to do, makes it all the duller for the younger maids in the house.’ Mrs. Morris then proceeded to give in fragmentary speeches an outline of the constitution and government of the estate.

‘Now, are you sure you have quite done tea? Not a bit or drop more? Why, you’ve eaten nothing, I’m sure... Well, now, it is rather inconvenient that the other maid is

not here to show you the ways of the house a little, but she left last Saturday, and Miss Aldclyffe has been making shift with poor old clumsy me for a maid all yesterday and this morning. She is not come in yet. I expect she will ask for you, Mrs. Graye, the first thing... I was going to say that if you have really done tea, I will take you upstairs, and show you through the wardrobes — Miss Aldclyffe's things are not laid out for to-night yet.'

She preceded Cytherea upstairs, pointed out her own room, and then took her into Miss Aldclyffe's dressing-room, on the first-floor; where, after explaining the whereabouts of various articles of apparel, the housekeeper left her, telling her that she had an hour yet upon her hands before dressing-time. Cytherea laid out upon the bed in the next room all that she had been told would be required that evening, and then went again to the little room which had been appropriated to herself.

Here she sat down by the open window, leant out upon the sill like another Blessed Damozel, and listlessly looked down upon the brilliant pattern of colours formed by the flower-beds on the lawn — now richly crowded with late summer blossom. But the vivacity of spirit which had hitherto enlivened her, was fast ebbing under the pressure of prosaic realities, and the warm scarlet of the geraniums, glowing most conspicuously, and mingling with the vivid cold red and green of the verbenas, the rich depth of the dahlia, and the ripe mellowness of the calceolaria, backed by the pale hue of a flock of meek sheep feeding in the open park, close to the other side of the fence, were, to a great extent, lost upon her eyes. She was thinking that nothing seemed worth while; that it was possible she might die in a workhouse; and what did it matter? The petty, vulgar details of servitude that she had just passed through, her dependence upon the whims of a strange woman, the necessity of quenching all individuality of character in herself, and relinquishing her own peculiar tastes to help on the wheel of this alien establishment, made her sick and sad, and she almost longed to pursue some free, out-of-doors employment, sleep under trees or a hut, and know no enemy but winter and cold weather, like shepherds and cowkeepers, and birds and animals — ay, like the sheep she saw there under her window. She looked sympathizingly at them for several minutes, imagining their enjoyment of the rich grass.

'Yes — like those sheep,' she said aloud; and her face reddened with surprise at a discovery she made that very instant.

The flock consisted of some ninety or a hundred young stock ewes: the surface of their fleece was as rounded and even as a cushion, and white as milk. Now she had just observed that on the left buttock of every one of them were marked in distinct red letters the initials 'E. S.'

'E. S.' could bring to Cytherea's mind only one thought; but that immediately and for ever — the name of her lover, Edward Springrove.

'O, if it should be — !' She interrupted her words by a resolve. Miss Aldclyffe's carriage at the same moment made its appearance in the drive; but Miss Aldclyffe was not her object now. It was to ascertain to whom the sheep belonged, and to set her surmise at rest one way or the other. She flew downstairs to Mrs. Morris.

‘Whose sheep are those in the park, Mrs. Morris?’

‘Farmer Springrove’s.’

‘What Farmer Springrove is that?’ she said quickly.

‘Why, surely you know? Your friend, Farmer Springrove, the cider-maker, and who keeps the Three Tranters Inn; who recommended you to me when he came in to see me the other day?’

Cytherea’s mother-wit suddenly warned her in the midst of her excitement that it was necessary not to betray the secret of her love. ‘O yes,’ she said, ‘of course.’ Her thoughts had run as follows in that short interval: —

‘Farmer Springrove is Edward’s father, and his name is Edward too.

‘Edward knew I was going to advertise for a situation of some kind.

‘He watched the Times, and saw it, my address being attached.

‘He thought it would be excellent for me to be here that we might meet whenever he came home.

‘He told his father that I might be recommended as a lady’s-maid; and he knew my brother and myself.

‘His father told Mrs. Morris; Mrs. Morris told Miss Aldclyffe.’

The whole chain of incidents that drew her there was plain, and there was no such thing as chance in the matter. It was all Edward’s doing.

The sound of a bell was heard. Cytherea did not heed it, and still continued in her reverie.

‘That’s Miss Aldclyffe’s bell,’ said Mrs. Morris.

‘I suppose it is,’ said the young woman placidly.

‘Well, it means that you must go up to her,’ the matron continued, in a tone of surprise.

Cytherea felt a burning heat come over her, mingled with a sudden irritation at Mrs. Morris’s hint. But the good sense which had recognized stern necessity prevailed over rebellious independence; the flush passed, and she said hastily —

‘Yes, yes; of course, I must go to her when she pulls the bell — whether I want to or no.’

However, in spite of this painful reminder of her new position in life, Cytherea left the apartment in a mood far different from the gloomy sadness of ten minutes previous. The place felt like home to her now; she did not mind the pettiness of her occupation, because Edward evidently did not mind it; and this was Edward’s own spot. She found time on her way to Miss Aldclyffe’s dressing-room to hurriedly glide out by a side door, and look for a moment at the unconscious sheep bearing the friendly initials. She went up to them to try to touch one of the flock, and felt vexed that they all stared sceptically at her kind advances, and then ran pell-mell down the hill. Then, fearing any one should discover her childish movements, she slipped indoors again, and ascended the staircase, catching glimpses, as she passed, of silver-buttoned footmen, who flashed about the passages like lightning.

Miss Aldclyffe's dressing-room was an apartment which, on a casual survey, conveyed an impression that it was available for almost any purpose save the adornment of the feminine person. In its hours of perfect order nothing pertaining to the toilet was visible; even the inevitable mirrors with their accessories were arranged in a roomy recess not noticeable from the door, lighted by a window of its own, called the dressing-window.

The washing-stand figured as a vast oak chest, carved with grotesque Renaissance ornament. The dressing table was in appearance something between a high altar and a cabinet piano, the surface being richly worked in the same style of semi-classic decoration, but the extraordinary outline having been arrived at by an ingenious joiner and decorator from the neighbouring town, after months of painful toil in cutting and fitting, under Miss Aldclyffe's immediate eye; the materials being the remains of two or three old cabinets the lady had found in the lumber-room. About two-thirds of the floor was carpeted, the remaining portion being laid with parquetry of light and dark woods.

Miss Aldclyffe was standing at the larger window, away from the dressing-niche. She bowed, and said pleasantly, 'I am glad you have come. We shall get on capitally, I dare say.'

Her bonnet was off. Cytherea did not think her so handsome as on the earlier day; the queenliness of her beauty was harder and less warm. But a worse discovery than this was that Miss Aldclyffe, with the usual obliviousness of rich people to their dependents' specialities, seemed to have quite forgotten Cytherea's inexperience, and mechanically delivered up her body to her handmaid without a thought of details, and with a mild yawn.

Everything went well at first. The dress was removed, stockings and black boots were taken off, and silk stockings and white shoes were put on. Miss Aldclyffe then retired to bathe her hands and face, and Cytherea drew breath. If she could get through this first evening, all would be right. She felt that it was unfortunate that such a crucial test for her powers as a birthday dinner should have been applied on the threshold of her arrival; but set to again.

Miss Aldclyffe was now arrayed in a white dressing-gown, and dropped languidly into an easy-chair, pushed up before the glass. The instincts of her sex and her own practice told Cytherea the next movement. She let Miss Aldclyffe's hair fall about her shoulders, and began to arrange it. It proved to be all real; a satisfaction.

Miss Aldclyffe was musingly looking on the floor, and the operation went on for some minutes in silence. At length her thoughts seemed to turn to the present, and she lifted her eyes to the glass.

'Why, what on earth are you doing with my head?' she exclaimed, with widely opened eyes. At the words she felt the back of Cytherea's little hand tremble against her neck.

'Perhaps you prefer it done the other fashion, madam?' said the maiden.

‘No, no; that’s the fashion right enough, but you must make more show of my hair than that, or I shall have to buy some, which God forbid!’

‘It is how I do my own,’ said Cytherea naively, and with a sweetness of tone that would have pleased the most acrimonious under favourable circumstances; but tyranny was in the ascendant with Miss Aldclyffe at this moment, and she was assured of palatable food for her vice by having felt the trembling of Cytherea’s hand.

‘Yours, indeed! Your hair! Come, go on.’ Considering that Cytherea possessed at least five times as much of that valuable auxiliary to woman’s beauty as the lady before her, there was at the same time some excuse for Miss Aldclyffe’s outburst. She remembered herself, however, and said more quietly, ‘Now then, Graye — By-the-bye, what do they call you downstairs?’

‘Mrs. Graye,’ said the handmaid.

‘Then tell them not to do any such absurd thing — not but that it is quite according to usage; but you are too young yet.’

This dialogue tided Cytherea safely onward through the hairdressing till the flowers and diamonds were to be placed upon the lady’s brow. Cytherea began arranging them tastefully, and to the very best of her judgment.

‘That won’t do,’ said Miss Aldclyffe harshly.

‘Why?’

‘I look too young — an old dressed doll.’

‘Will that, madam?’

‘No, I look a fright — a perfect fright!’

‘This way, perhaps?’

‘Heavens! Don’t worry me so.’ She shut her lips like a trap.

Having once worked herself up to the belief that her head-dress was to be a failure that evening, no cleverness of Cytherea’s in arranging it could please her. She continued in a smouldering passion during the remainder of the performance, keeping her lips firmly closed, and the muscles of her body rigid. Finally, snatching up her gloves, and taking her handkerchief and fan in her hand, she silently sailed out of the room, without betraying the least consciousness of another woman’s presence behind her.

Cytherea’s fears that at the undressing this suppressed anger would find a vent, kept her on thorns throughout the evening. She tried to read; she could not. She tried to sew; she could not. She tried to muse; she could not do that connectedly. ‘If this is the beginning, what will the end be!’ she said in a whisper, and felt many misgivings as to the policy of being overhasty in establishing an independence at the expense of congruity with a cherished past.

3. MIDNIGHT

The clock struck twelve. The Aldclyffe state dinner was over. The company had all gone, and Miss Aldclyffe’s bell rang loudly and jerkingly.

Cytherea started to her feet at the sound, which broke in upon a fitful sleep that had overtaken her. She had been sitting drearily in her chair waiting minute after minute for the signal, her brain in that state of intentness which takes cognizance

of the passage of Time as a real motion — motion without matter — the instants throbbing past in the company of a feverish pulse. She hastened to the room, to find the lady sitting before the dressing shrine, illuminated on both sides, and looking so queenly in her attitude of absolute repose, that the younger woman felt the awfulest sense of responsibility at her Vandalism in having undertaken to demolish so imposing a pile.

The lady's jewelled ornaments were taken off in silence — some by her own listless hands, some by Cytherea's. Then followed the outer stratum of clothing. The dress being removed, Cytherea took it in her hand and went with it into the bedroom adjoining, intending to hang it in the wardrobe. But on second thoughts, in order that she might not keep Miss Aldclyffe waiting a moment longer than necessary, she flung it down on the first resting-place that came to hand, which happened to be the bed, and re-entered the dressing-room with the noiseless footfall of a kitten. She paused in the middle of the room.

She was unnoticed, and her sudden return had plainly not been expected. During the short time of Cytherea's absence, Miss Aldclyffe had pulled off a kind of chemisette of Brussels net, drawn high above the throat, which she had worn with her evening dress as a semi-opaque covering to her shoulders, and in its place had put her night-gown round her. Her right hand was lifted to her neck, as if engaged in fastening her night-gown.

But on a second glance Miss Aldclyffe's proceeding was clearer to Cytherea. She was not fastening her night-gown; it had been carelessly thrown round her, and Miss Aldclyffe was really occupied in holding up to her eyes some small object that she was keenly scrutinizing. And now on suddenly discovering the presence of Cytherea at the back of the apartment, instead of naturally continuing or concluding her inspection, she desisted hurriedly; the tiny snap of a spring was heard, her hand was removed, and she began adjusting her robes.

Modesty might have directed her hasty action of enwrapping her shoulders, but it was scarcely likely, considering Miss Aldclyffe's temperament, that she had all her life been used to a maid, Cytherea's youth, and the elder lady's marked treatment of her as if she were a mere child or plaything. The matter was too slight to reason about, and yet upon the whole it seemed that Miss Aldclyffe must have a practical reason for concealing her neck.

With a timid sense of being an intruder Cytherea was about to step back and out of the room; but at the same moment Miss Aldclyffe turned, saw the impulse, and told her companion to stay, looking into her eyes as if she had half an intention to explain something. Cytherea felt certain it was the little mystery of her late movements. The other withdrew her eyes; Cytherea went to fetch the dressing-gown, and wheeled round again to bring it up to Miss Aldclyffe, who had now partly removed her night-dress to put it on the proper way, and still sat with her back towards Cytherea.

Her neck was again quite open and uncovered, and though hidden from the direct line of Cytherea's vision, she saw it reflected in the glass — the fair white surface, and

the inimitable combination of curves between throat and bosom which artists adore, being brightly lit up by the light burning on either side.

And the lady's prior proceedings were now explained in the simplest manner. In the midst of her breast, like an island in a sea of pearl, reclined an exquisite little gold locket, embellished with arabesque work of blue, red, and white enamel. That was undoubtedly what Miss Aldclyffe had been contemplating; and, moreover, not having been put off with her other ornaments, it was to be retained during the night — a slight departure from the custom of ladies which Miss Aldclyffe had at first not cared to exhibit to her new assistant, though now, on further thought, she seemed to have become indifferent on the matter.

'My dressing-gown,' she said, quietly fastening her night-dress as she spoke.

Cytherea came forward with it. Miss Aldclyffe did not turn her head, but looked inquiringly at her maid in the glass.

'You saw what I wear on my neck, I suppose?' she said to Cytherea's reflected face.

'Yes, madam, I did,' said Cytherea to Miss Aldclyffe's reflected face.

Miss Aldclyffe again looked at Cytherea's reflection as if she were on the point of explaining. Again she checked her resolve, and said lightly —

'Few of my maids discover that I wear it always. I generally keep it a secret — not that it matters much. But I was careless with you, and seemed to want to tell you. You win me to make confidences that...'

She ceased, took Cytherea's hand in her own, lifted the locket with the other, touched the spring and disclosed a miniature.

'It is a handsome face, is it not?' she whispered mournfully, and even timidly.

'It is.'

But the sight had gone through Cytherea like an electric shock, and there was an instantaneous awakening of perception in her, so thrilling in its presence as to be well-nigh insupportable. The face in the miniature was the face of her own father — younger and fresher than she had ever known him — but her father!

Was this the woman of his wild and unquenchable early love? And was this the woman who had figured in the gate-man's story as answering the name of Cytherea before her judgment was awake? Surely it was. And if so, here was the tangible outcrop of a romantic and hidden stratum of the past hitherto seen only in her imagination; but as far as her scope allowed, clearly defined therein by reason of its strangeness.

Miss Aldclyffe's eyes and thoughts were so intent upon the miniature that she had not been conscious of Cytherea's start of surprise. She went on speaking in a low and abstracted tone.

'Yes, I lost him.' She interrupted her words by a short meditation, and went on again. 'I lost him by excess of honesty as regarded my past. But it was best that it should be so... I was led to think rather more than usual of the circumstances to-night because of your name. It is pronounced the same way, though differently spelt.'

The only means by which Cytherea's surname could have been spelt to Miss Aldclyffe must have been by Mrs. Morris or Farmer Springrove. She fancied Farmer

Springrove would have spelt it properly if Edward was his informant, which made Miss Aldclyffe's remark obscure.

Women make confidences and then regret them. The impulsive rush of feeling which had led Miss Aldclyffe to indulge in this revelation, trifling as it was, died out immediately her words were beyond recall; and the turmoil, occasioned in her by dwelling upon that chapter of her life, found vent in another kind of emotion — the result of a trivial accident.

Cytherea, after letting down Miss Aldclyffe's hair, adopted some plan with it to which the lady had not been accustomed. A rapid revulsion to irritation ensued. The maiden's mere touch seemed to discharge the pent-up regret of the lady as if she had been a jar of electricity.

'How strangely you treat my hair!' she exclaimed.

A silence.

'I have told you what I never tell my maids as a rule; of course nothing that I say in this room is to be mentioned outside it.' She spoke crossly no less than emphatically.

'It shall not be, madam,' said Cytherea, agitated and vexed that the woman of her romantic wonderings should be so disagreeable to her.

'Why on earth did I tell you of my past?' she went on.

Cytherea made no answer.

The lady's vexation with herself, and the accident which had led to the disclosure swelled little by little till it knew no bounds. But what was done could not be undone, and though Cytherea had shown a most winning responsiveness, quarrel Miss Aldclyffe must. She recurred to the subject of Cytherea's want of expertness, like a bitter reviewer, who finding the sentiments of a poet unimpeachable, quarrels with his rhymes.

'Never, never before did I serve myself such a trick as this in engaging a maid!' She waited for an expostulation: none came. Miss Aldclyffe tried again.

'The idea of my taking a girl without asking her more than three questions, or having a single reference, all because of her good l — , the shape of her face and body! It was a fool's trick. There, I am served right, quite right — by being deceived in such a way.'

'I didn't deceive you,' said Cytherea. The speech was an unfortunate one, and was the very 'fuel to maintain its fires' that the other's petulance desired.

'You did,' she said hotly.

'I told you I couldn't promise to be acquainted with every detail of routine just at first.'

'Will you contradict me in this way! You are telling untruths, I say.'

Cytherea's lip quivered. 'I would answer the remark if — if —'

'If what?'

'If it were a lady's!'

'You girl of impudence — what do you say? Leave the room this instant, I tell you.'

‘And I tell you that a person who speaks to a lady as you do to me, is no lady herself!’

‘To a lady? A lady’s-maid speaks in this way. The idea!’

‘Don’t “lady’s-maid” me: nobody is my mistress I won’t have it!’

‘Good Heavens!’

‘I wouldn’t have come — no — I wouldn’t! if I had known!’

‘What?’

‘That you were such an ill-tempered, unjust woman!’

‘Possess beyond the Muse’s painting,’ Miss Aldclyffe exclaimed —

‘A Woman, am I! I’ll teach you if I am a Woman!’ and lifted her hand as if she would have liked to strike her companion. This stung the maiden into absolute defiance.

‘I dare you to touch me!’ she cried. ‘Strike me if you dare, madam! I am not afraid of you — what do you mean by such an action as that?’

Miss Aldclyffe was disconcerted at this unexpected show of spirit, and ashamed of her unladylike impulse now it was put into words. She sank back in the chair. ‘I was not going to strike you — go to your room — I beg you to go to your room!’ she repeated in a husky whisper.

Cytherea, red and panting, took up her candlestick and advanced to the table to get a light. As she stood close to them the rays from the candles struck sharply on her face. She usually bore a much stronger likeness to her mother than to her father, but now, looking with a grave, reckless, and angered expression of countenance at the kindling wick as she held it slanting into the other flame, her father’s features were distinct in her. It was the first time Miss Aldclyffe had seen her in a passionate mood, and wearing that expression which was invariably its concomitant. It was Miss Aldclyffe’s turn to start now; and the remark she made was an instance of that sudden change of tone from high-flown invective to the pettiness of curiosity which so often makes women’s quarrels ridiculous. Even Miss Aldclyffe’s dignity had not sufficient power to postpone the absorbing desire she now felt to settle the strange suspicion that had entered her head.

‘You spell your name the common way, G, R, E, Y, don’t you?’ she said, with assumed indifference.

‘No,’ said Cytherea, poised on the side of her foot, and still looking into the flame.

‘Yes, surely? The name was spelt that way on your boxes: I looked and saw it myself.’

The enigma of Miss Aldclyffe’s mistake was solved. ‘O, was it?’ said Cytherea. ‘Ah, I remember Mrs. Jackson, the lodging-house keeper at Budmouth, labelled them. We spell our name G, R, A, Y, E.’

‘What was your father’s trade?’

Cytherea thought it would be useless to attempt to conceal facts any longer. ‘His was not a trade,’ she said. ‘He was an architect.’

‘The idea of your being an architect’s daughter!’

‘There’s nothing to offend you in that, I hope?’

‘O no.’

‘Why did you say “the idea”?’

‘Leave that alone. Did he ever visit in Gower Street, Bloomsbury, one Christmas, many years ago? — but you would not know that.’

‘I have heard him say that Mr. Huntway, a curate somewhere in that part of London, and who died there, was an old college friend of his.’

‘What is your Christian name?’

‘Cytherea.’

‘No! And is it really? And you knew that face I showed you? Yes, I see you did.’ Miss Aldclyffe stopped, and closed her lips impassibly. She was a little agitated.

‘Do you want me any longer?’ said Cytherea, standing candle in hand and looking quietly in Miss Aldclyffe’s face.

‘Well — no: no longer,’ said the other lingeringly.

‘With your permission, I will leave the house to morrow morning, madam.’

‘Ah.’ Miss Aldclyffe had no notion of what she was saying.

‘And I know you will be so good as not to intrude upon me during the short remainder of my stay?’

Saying this Cytherea left the room before her companion had answered. Miss Aldclyffe, then, had recognized her at last, and had been curious about her name from the beginning.

The other members of the household had retired to rest. As Cytherea went along the passage leading to her room her skirts rustled against the partition. A door on her left opened, and Mrs. Morris looked out.

‘I waited out of bed till you came up,’ she said, ‘it being your first night, in case you should be at a loss for anything. How have you got on with Miss Aldclyffe?’

‘Pretty well — though not so well as I could have wished.’

‘Has she been scolding?’

‘A little.’

‘She’s a very odd lady — ’tis all one way or the other with her. She’s not bad at heart, but unbearable in close quarters. Those of us who don’t have much to do with her personally, stay on for years and years.’

‘Has Miss Aldclyffe’s family always been rich?’ said Cytherea.

‘O no. The property, with the name, came from her mother’s uncle. Her family is a branch of the old Aldclyffe family on the maternal side. Her mother married a Bradleigh — a mere nobody at that time — and was on that account cut by her relations. But very singularly the other branch of the family died out one by one — three of them, and Miss Aldclyffe’s great-uncle then left all his property, including this estate, to Captain Bradleigh and his wife — Miss Aldclyffe’s father and mother — on condition that they took the old family name as well. There’s all about it in the “Landed Gentry.” ’Tis a thing very often done.’

‘O, I see. Thank you. Well, now I am going. Good-night.’

VI. THE EVENTS OF TWELVE HOURS

1. AUGUST THE NINTH. ONE TO TWO O'CLOCK A.M.

Cytherea entered her bedroom, and flung herself on the bed, bewildered by a whirl of thought. Only one subject was clear in her mind, and it was that, in spite of family discoveries, that day was to be the first and last of her experience as a lady's-maid. Starvation itself should not compel her to hold such a humiliating post for another instant. 'Ah,' she thought, with a sigh, at the martyrdom of her last little fragment of self-conceit, 'Owen knows everything better than I.'

She jumped up and began making ready for her departure in the morning, the tears streaming down when she grieved and wondered what practical matter on earth she could turn her hand to next. All these preparations completed, she began to undress, her mind unconsciously drifting away to the contemplation of her late surprises. To look in the glass for an instant at the reflection of her own magnificent resources in face and bosom, and to mark their attractiveness unadorned, was perhaps but the natural action of a young woman who had so lately been chidden whilst passing through the harassing experience of decorating an older beauty of Miss Aldclyffe's temper.

But she directly checked her weakness by sympathizing reflections on the hidden troubles which must have thronged the past years of the solitary lady, to keep her, though so rich and courted, in a mood so repellent and gloomy as that in which Cytherea found her; and then the young girl marvelled again and again, as she had marvelled before, at the strange confluence of circumstances which had brought herself into contact with the one woman in the world whose history was so romantically intertwined with her own. She almost began to wish she were not obliged to go away and leave the lonely being to loneliness still.

In bed and in the dark, Miss Aldclyffe haunted her mind more persistently than ever. Instead of sleeping, she called up staring visions of the possible past of this queenly lady, her mother's rival. Up the long vista of bygone years she saw, behind all, the young girl's flirtation, little or much, with the cousin, that seemed to have been nipped in the bud, or to have terminated hastily in some way. Then the secret meetings between Miss Aldclyffe and the other woman at the little inn at Hammersmith and other places: the commonplace name she adopted: her swoon at some painful news, and the very slight knowledge the elder female had of her partner in mystery. Then, more than a year afterwards, the acquaintanceship of her own father with this his first love; the awakening of the passion, his acts of devotion, the unreasoning heat of his rapture, her tacit acceptance of it, and yet her uneasiness under the delight. Then his declaration amid the evergreens: the utter change produced in her manner thereby, seemingly the result of a rigid determination: and the total concealment of her reason by herself and her parents, whatever it was. Then the lady's course dropped into darkness, and nothing more was visible till she was discovered here at Knapwater, nearly fifty years old, still unmarried and still beautiful, but lonely, embittered, and haughty. Cytherea imagined that her father's image was still warmly cherished in Miss Aldclyffe's heart,

and was thankful that she herself had not been betrayed into announcing that she knew many particulars of this page of her father's history, and the chief one, the lady's unaccountable renunciation of him. It would have made her bearing towards the mistress of the mansion more awkward, and would have been no benefit to either.

Thus conjuring up the past, and theorizing on the present, she lay restless, changing her posture from one side to the other and back again. Finally, when courting sleep with all her art, she heard a clock strike two. A minute later, and she fancied she could distinguish a soft rustle in the passage outside her room.

To bury her head in the sheets was her first impulse; then to uncover it, raise herself on her elbow, and stretch her eyes wide open in the darkness; her lips being parted with the intentness of her listening. Whatever the noise was, it had ceased for the time.

It began again and came close to her door, lightly touching the panels. Then there was another stillness; Cytherea made a movement which caused a faint rustling of the bed-clothes.

Before she had time to think another thought a light tap was given. Cytherea breathed: the person outside was evidently bent upon finding her awake, and the rustle she had made had encouraged the hope. The maiden's physical condition shifted from one pole to its opposite. The cold sweat of terror forsook her, and modesty took the alarm. She became hot and red; her door was not locked.

A distinct woman's whisper came to her through the keyhole: 'Cytherea!'

Only one being in the house knew her Christian name, and that was Miss Aldclyffe. Cytherea stepped out of bed, went to the door, and whispered back, 'Yes?'

'Let me come in, darling.'

The young woman paused in a conflict between judgment and emotion. It was now mistress and maid no longer; woman and woman only. Yes; she must let her come in, poor thing.

She got a light in an instant, opened the door, and raising her eyes and the candle, saw Miss Aldclyffe standing outside in her dressing-gown.

'Now you see that it is really myself; put out the light,' said the visitor. 'I want to stay here with you, Cythie. I came to ask you to come down into my bed, but it is snigger here. But remember that you are mistress in this room, and that I have no business here, and that you may send me away if you choose. Shall I go?'

'O no; you shan't indeed if you don't want to,' said Cythie generously.

The instant they were in bed Miss Aldclyffe freed herself from the last remnant of restraint. She flung her arms round the young girl, and pressed her gently to her heart.

'Now kiss me,' she said.

Cytherea, upon the whole, was rather discomposed at this change of treatment; and, discomposed or no, her passions were not so impetuous as Miss Aldclyffe's. She could not bring her soul to her lips for a moment, try how she would.

'Come, kiss me,' repeated Miss Aldclyffe.

Cytherea gave her a very small one, as soft in touch and in sound as the bursting of a bubble.

‘More earnestly than that — come.’

She gave another, a little but not much more expressively.

‘I don’t deserve a more feeling one, I suppose,’ said Miss Aldclyffe, with an emphasis of sad bitterness in her tone. ‘I am an ill-tempered woman, you think; half out of my mind. Well, perhaps I am; but I have had grief more than you can think or dream of. But I can’t help loving you — your name is the same as mine — isn’t it strange?’

Cytherea was inclined to say no, but remained silent.

‘Now, don’t you think I must love you?’ continued the other.

‘Yes,’ said Cytherea absently. She was still thinking whether duty to Owen and her father, which asked for silence on her knowledge of her father’s unfortunate love, or duty to the woman embracing her, which seemed to ask for confidence, ought to predominate. Here was a solution. She would wait till Miss Aldclyffe referred to her acquaintanceship and attachment to Cytherea’s father in past times: then she would tell her all she knew: that would be honour.

‘Why can’t you kiss me as I can kiss you? Why can’t you!’ She impressed upon Cytherea’s lips a warm motherly salute, given as if in the outburst of strong feeling, long checked, and yearning for something to love and be loved by in return.

‘Do you think badly of me for my behaviour this evening, child? I don’t know why I am so foolish as to speak to you in this way. I am a very fool, I believe. Yes. How old are you?’

‘Eighteen.’

‘Eighteen!... Well, why don’t you ask me how old I am?’

‘Because I don’t want to know.’

‘Never mind if you don’t. I am forty-six; and it gives me greater pleasure to tell you this than it does to you to listen. I have not told my age truly for the last twenty years till now.’

‘Why haven’t you?’

‘I have met deceit by deceit, till I am weary of it — weary, weary — and I long to be what I shall never be again — artless and innocent, like you. But I suppose that you, too, will, prove to be not worth a thought, as every new friend does on more intimate knowledge. Come, why don’t you talk to me, child? Have you said your prayers?’

‘Yes — no! I forgot them to-night.’

‘I suppose you say them every night as a rule?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why do you do that?’

‘Because I have always done so, and it would seem strange if I were not to. Do you?’

‘I? A wicked old sinner like me! No, I never do. I have thought all such matters humbug for years — thought so so long that I should be glad to think otherwise from very weariness; and yet, such is the code of the polite world, that I subscribe regularly to Missionary Societies and others of the sort... Well, say your prayers, dear — you won’t omit them now you recollect it. I should like to hear you very much. Will you?’

‘It seems hardly — ’

‘It would seem so like old times to me — when I was young, and nearer — far nearer Heaven than I am now. Do, sweet one,’

Cytherea was embarrassed, and her embarrassment arose from the following conjuncture of affairs. Since she had loved Edward Springrove, she had linked his name with her brother Owen’s in her nightly supplications to the Almighty. She wished to keep her love for him a secret, and, above all, a secret from a woman like Miss Aldclyffe; yet her conscience and the honesty of her love would not for an instant allow her to think of omitting his dear name, and so endanger the efficacy of all her previous prayers for his success by an unworthy shame now: it would be wicked of her, she thought, and a grievous wrong to him. Under any worldly circumstances she might have thought the position justified a little finesse, and have skipped him for once; but prayer was too solemn a thing for such trifling.

‘I would rather not say them,’ she murmured first. It struck her then that this declining altogether was the same cowardice in another dress, and was delivering her poor Edward over to Satan just as unceremoniously as before. ‘Yes; I will say my prayers, and you shall hear me,’ she added firmly.

She turned her face to the pillow and repeated in low soft tones the simple words she had used from childhood on such occasions. Owen’s name was mentioned without faltering, but in the other case, maidenly shyness was too strong even for religion, and that when supported by excellent intentions. At the name of Edward she stammered, and her voice sank to the faintest whisper in spite of her.

‘Thank you, dearest,’ said Miss Aldclyffe. ‘I have prayed too, I verily believe. You are a good girl, I think.’ Then the expected question came.

“‘Bless Owen,” and whom, did you say?’

There was no help for it now, and out it came. ‘Owen and Edward,’ said Cytherea.

‘Who are Owen and Edward?’

‘Owen is my brother, madam,’ faltered the maid.

‘Ah, I remember. Who is Edward?’

A silence.

‘Your brother, too?’ continued Miss Aldclyffe.

‘No.’

Miss Aldclyffe reflected a moment. ‘Don’t you want to tell me who Edward is?’ she said at last, in a tone of meaning.

‘I don’t mind telling; only...’

‘You would rather not, I suppose?’

‘Yes.’

Miss Aldclyffe shifted her ground. ‘Were you ever in love?’ she inquired suddenly.

Cytherea was surprised to hear how quickly the voice had altered from tenderness to harshness, vexation, and disappointment.

‘Yes — I think I was — once,’ she murmured.

‘Aha! And were you ever kissed by a man?’

A pause.

‘Well, were you?’ said Miss Aldclyffe, rather sharply.

‘Don’t press me to tell — I can’t — indeed, I won’t, madam!’

Miss Aldclyffe removed her arms from Cytherea’s neck. ‘‘Tis now with you as it is always with all girls,’ she said, in jealous and gloomy accents. ‘You are not, after all, the innocent I took you for. No, no.’ She then changed her tone with fitful rapidity. ‘Cytherea, try to love me more than you love him — do. I love you more sincerely than any man can. Do, Cythie: don’t let any man stand between us. O, I can’t bear that!’ She clasped Cytherea’s neck again.

‘I must love him now I have begun,’ replied the other.

‘Must — yes — must,’ said the elder lady reproachfully. ‘Yes, women are all alike. I thought I had at last found an artless woman who had not been sullied by a man’s lips, and who had not practised or been practised upon by the arts which ruin all the truth and sweetness and goodness in us. Find a girl, if you can, whose mouth and ears have not been made a regular highway of by some man or another! Leave the admittedly notorious spots — the drawing-rooms of society — and look in the villages — leave the villages and search in the schools — and you can hardly find a girl whose heart has not been had — is not an old thing half worn out by some He or another! If men only knew the staleness of the freshest of us! that nine times out of ten the “first love” they think they are winning from a woman is but the hulk of an old wrecked affection, fitted with new sails and re-used. O Cytherea, can it be that you, too, are like the rest?’

‘No, no, no,’ urged Cytherea, awed by the storm she had raised in the impetuous woman’s mind. ‘He only kissed me once — twice I mean.’

‘He might have done it a thousand times if he had cared to, there’s no doubt about that, whoever his lordship is. You are as bad as I — we are all alike; and I — an old fool — have been sipping at your mouth as if it were honey, because I fancied no wasting lover knew the spot. But a minute ago, and you seemed to me like a fresh spring meadow — now you seem a dusty highway.’

‘O no, no!’ Cytherea was not weak enough to shed tears except on extraordinary occasions, but she was fain to begin sobbing now. She wished Miss Aldclyffe would go to her own room, and leave her and her treasured dreams alone. This vehement imperious affection was in one sense soothing, but yet it was not of the kind that Cytherea’s instincts desired. Though it was generous, it seemed somewhat too rank and capricious for endurance.

‘Well,’ said the lady in continuation, ‘who is he?’

Her companion was desperately determined not to tell his name: she too much feared a taunt when Miss Aldclyffe’s fiery mood again ruled her tongue.

‘Won’t you tell me? not tell me after all the affection I have shown?’

‘I will, perhaps, another day.’

‘Did you wear a hat and white feather in Budmouth for the week or two previous to your coming here?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then I have seen you and your lover at a distance! He rowed you round the bay with your brother.’

‘Yes.’

‘And without your brother — fie! There, there, don’t let that little heart beat itself to death: throb, throb: it shakes the bed, you silly thing. I didn’t mean that there was any harm in going alone with him. I only saw you from the Esplanade, in common with the rest of the people. I often run down to Budmouth. He was a very good figure: now who was he?’

‘I — I won’t tell, madam — I cannot indeed!’

‘Won’t tell — very well, don’t. You are very foolish to treasure up his name and image as you do. Why, he has had loves before you, trust him for that, whoever he is, and you are but a temporary link in a long chain of others like you: who only have your little day as they have had theirs.’

“‘Tisn’t true! ‘tisn’t true! ‘tisn’t true!’ cried Cytherea in an agony of torture. ‘He has never loved anybody else, I know — I am sure he hasn’t.’

Miss Aldclyffe was as jealous as any man could have been. She continued —

‘He sees a beautiful face and thinks he will never forget it, but in a few weeks the feeling passes off, and he wonders how he could have cared for anybody so absurdly much.’

‘No, no, he doesn’t — What does he do when he has thought that — Come, tell me — tell me!’

‘You are as hot as fire, and the throbbing of your heart makes me nervous. I can’t tell you if you get in that flustered state.’

‘Do, do tell — O, it makes me so miserable! but tell — come tell me!’

‘Ah — the tables are turned now, dear!’ she continued, in a tone which mingled pity with derision —

“‘Love’s passions shall rock thee

As the storm rocks the ravens on high,

Bright reason will mock thee

Like the sun from a wintry sky.”

‘What does he do next? — Why, this is what he does next: ruminates on what he has heard of women’s romantic impulses, and how easily men torture them when they have given way to those feelings, and have resigned everything for their hero. It may be that though he loves you heartily now — that is, as heartily as a man can — and you love him in return, your loves may be impracticable and hopeless, and you may be separated for ever. You, as the weary, weary years pass by will fade and fade — bright eyes will fade — and you will perhaps then die early — true to him to your latest breath, and believing him to be true to the latest breath also; whilst he, in some gay and busy spot far away from your last quiet nook, will have married some dashing lady, and not purely oblivious of you, will long have ceased to regret you — will chat about you, as you were in long past years — will say, “Ah, little Cytherea used to tie her hair like that — poor innocent trusting thing; it was a pleasant useless idle dream

— that dream of mine for the maid with the bright eyes and simple, silly heart; but I was a foolish lad at that time.” Then he will tell the tale of all your little Wills and Wont’s and particular ways, and as he speaks, turn to his wife with a placid smile.’

‘It is not true! He can’t, he c-can’t be s-so cruel — and you are cruel to me — you are, you are!’ She was at last driven to desperation: her natural common sense and shrewdness had seen all through the piece how imaginary her emotions were — she felt herself to be weak and foolish in permitting them to rise; but even then she could not control them: be agonized she must. She was only eighteen, and the long day’s labour, her weariness, her excitement, had completely unnerved her, and worn her out: she was bent hither and thither by this tyrannical working upon her imagination, as a young rush in the wind. She wept bitterly. ‘And now think how much I like you,’ resumed Miss Aldclyffe, when Cytherea grew calmer. ‘I shall never forget you for anybody else, as men do — never. I will be exactly as a mother to you. Now will you promise to live with me always, and always be taken care of, and never deserted?’

‘I cannot. I will not be anybody’s maid for another day on any consideration.’

‘No, no, no. You shan’t be a lady’s-maid. You shall be my companion. I will get another maid.’

Companion — that was a new idea. Cytherea could not resist the evidently heartfelt desire of the strange-tempered woman for her presence. But she could not trust to the moment’s impulse.

‘I will stay, I think. But do not ask for a final answer to-night.’

‘Never mind now, then. Put your hair round your mamma’s neck, and give me one good long kiss, and I won’t talk any more in that way about your lover. After all, some young men are not so fickle as others; but even if he’s the ficklest, there is consolation. The love of an inconstant man is ten times more ardent than that of a faithful man — that is, while it lasts.’

Cytherea did as she was told, to escape the punishment of further talk; flung the twining tresses of her long, rich hair over Miss Aldclyffe’s shoulders as directed, and the two ceased conversing, making themselves up for sleep. Miss Aldclyffe seemed to give herself over to a luxurious sense of content and quiet, as if the maiden at her side afforded her a protection against dangers which had menaced her for years; she was soon sleeping calmly.

2. TWO TO FIVE A.M.

With Cytherea it was otherwise. Unused to the place and circumstances, she continued wakeful, ill at ease, and mentally distressed. She withdrew herself from her companion’s embrace, turned to the other side, and endeavoured to relieve her busy brain by looking at the window-blind, and noticing the light of the rising moon — now in her last quarter — creep round upon it: it was the light of an old waning moon which had but a few days longer to live.

The sight led her to think again of what had happened under the rays of the same month’s moon, a little before its full, the ecstatic evening scene with Edward: the kiss,

and the shortness of those happy moments — maiden imagination bringing about the apotheosis of a status quo which had had several unpleasantnesses in its earthly reality.

But sounds were in the ascendant that night. Her ears became aware of a strange and gloomy murmur.

She recognized it: it was the gushing of the waterfall, faint and low, brought from its source to the unwonted distance of the House by a faint breeze which made it distinct and recognizable by reason of the utter absence of all disturbing sounds. The groom's melancholy representation lent to the sound a more dismal effect than it would have had of its own nature. She began to fancy what the waterfall must be like at that hour, under the trees in the ghostly moonlight. Black at the head, and over the surface of the deep cold hole into which it fell; white and frothy at the fall; black and white, like a pall and its border; sad everywhere.

She was in the mood for sounds of every kind now, and strained her ears to catch the faintest, in wayward enmity to her quiet of mind. Another soon came.

The second was quite different from the first — a kind of intermittent whistle it seemed primarily: no, a creak, a metallic creak, ever and anon, like a plough, or a rusty wheelbarrow, or at least a wheel of some kind. Yes, it was, a wheel — the water-wheel in the shrubbery by the old manor-house, which the coachman had said would drive him mad.

She determined not to think any more of these gloomy things; but now that she had once noticed the sound there was no sealing her ears to it. She could not help timing its creaks, and putting on a dread expectancy just before the end of each half-minute that brought them. To imagine the inside of the engine-house, whence these noises proceeded, was now a necessity. No window, but crevices in the door, through which, probably, the moonbeams streamed in the most attenuated and skeleton-like rays, striking sharply upon portions of wet rusty cranks and chains; a glistening wheel, turning incessantly, labouring in the dark like a captive starving in a dungeon; and instead of a floor below, gurgling water, which on account of the darkness could only be heard; water which laboured up dark pipes almost to where she lay.

She shivered. Now she was determined to go to sleep; there could be nothing else left to be heard or to imagine — it was horrid that her imagination should be so restless. Yet just for an instant before going to sleep she would think this — suppose another sound should come — just suppose it should! Before the thought had well passed through her brain, a third sound came.

The third was a very soft gurgle or rattle — of a strange and abnormal kind — yet a sound she had heard before at some past period of her life — when, she could not recollect. To make it the more disturbing, it seemed to be almost close to her — either close outside the window, close under the floor, or close above the ceiling. The accidental fact of its coming so immediately upon the heels of her supposition, told so powerfully upon her excited nerves that she jumped up in the bed. The same instant, a little dog in some room near, having probably heard the same noise, set up a low whine. The watch-dog in the yard, hearing the moan of his associate, began to howl

loudly and distinctly. His melancholy notes were taken up directly afterwards by the dogs in the kennel a long way off, in every variety of wail.

One logical thought alone was able to enter her flurried brain. The little dog that began the whining must have heard the other two sounds even better than herself. He had taken no notice of them, but he had taken notice of the third. The third, then, was an unusual sound.

It was not like water, it was not like wind; it was not the night-jar, it was not a clock, nor a rat, nor a person snoring.

She crept under the clothes, and flung her arms tightly round Miss Aldclyffe, as if for protection. Cytherea perceived that the lady's late peaceful warmth had given place to a sweat. At the maiden's touch, Miss Aldclyffe awoke with a low scream.

She remembered her position instantly. 'O such a terrible dream!' she cried, in a hurried whisper, holding to Cytherea in her turn; 'and your touch was the end of it. It was dreadful. Time, with his wings, hour-glass, and scythe, coming nearer and nearer to me — grinning and mocking; then he seized me, took a piece of me only... But I can't tell you. I can't bear to think of it. How those dogs howl! People say it means death.'

The return of Miss Aldclyffe to consciousness was sufficient to dispel the wild fancies which the loneliness of the night had woven in Cytherea's mind. She dismissed the third noise as something which in all likelihood could easily be explained, if trouble were taken to inquire into it: large houses had all kinds of strange sounds floating about them. She was ashamed to tell Miss Aldclyffe her terrors.

A silence of five minutes.

'Are you asleep?' said Miss Aldclyffe.

'No,' said Cytherea, in a long-drawn whisper.

'How those dogs howl, don't they?'

'Yes. A little dog in the house began it.'

'Ah, yes: that was Totsy. He sleeps on the mat outside my father's bedroom door. A nervous creature.'

There was a silent interval of nearly half-an-hour. A clock on the landing struck three.

'Are you asleep, Miss Aldclyffe?' whispered Cytherea.

'No,' said Miss Aldclyffe. 'How wretched it is not to be able to sleep, isn't it?'

'Yes,' replied Cytherea, like a docile child.

Another hour passed, and the clock struck four. Miss Aldclyffe was still awake.

'Cytherea,' she said, very softly.

Cytherea made no answer. She was sleeping soundly.

The first glimmer of dawn was now visible. Miss Aldclyffe arose, put on her dressing-gown, and went softly downstairs to her own room.

'I have not told her who I am after all, or found out the particulars of Ambrose's history,' she murmured. 'But her being in love alters everything.'

3. HALF-PAST SEVEN TO TEN O'CLOCK A.M.

Cytherea awoke, quiet in mind and refreshed. A conclusion to remain at Knapwater was already in possession of her.

Finding Miss Aldclyffe gone, she dressed herself and sat down at the window to write an answer to Edward's letter, and an account of her arrival at Knapwater to Owen. The dismal and heart-breaking pictures that Miss Aldclyffe had placed before her the preceding evening, the later terrors of the night, were now but as shadows of shadows, and she smiled in derision at her own excitability.

But writing Edward's letter was the great consoler, the effect of each word upon him being enacted in her own face as she wrote it. She felt how much she would like to share his trouble — how well she could endure poverty with him — and wondered what his trouble was. But all would be explained at last, she knew.

At the appointed time she went to Miss Aldclyffe's room, intending, with the contradictoriness common in people, to perform with pleasure, as a work of supererogation, what as a duty was simply intolerable.

Miss Aldclyffe was already out of bed. The bright penetrating light of morning made a vast difference in the elder lady's behaviour to her dependent; the day, which had restored Cytherea's judgment, had effected the same for Miss Aldclyffe. Though practical reasons forbade her regretting that she had secured such a companionable creature to read, talk, or play to her whenever her whim required, she was inwardly vexed at the extent to which she had indulged in the womanly luxury of making confidences and giving way to emotions. Few would have supposed that the calm lady sitting aristocratically at the toilet table, seeming scarcely conscious of Cytherea's presence in the room, even when greeting her, was the passionate creature who had asked for kisses a few hours before.

It is both painful and satisfactory to think how often these antitheses are to be observed in the individual most open to our observation — ourselves. We pass the evening with faces lit up by some flaring illumination or other: we get up the next morning — the fiery jets have all gone out, and nothing confronts us but a few crinkled pipes and sooty wirework, hardly even recalling the outline of the blazing picture that arrested our eyes before bedtime.

Emotions would be half starved if there were no candle-light. Probably nine-tenths of the gushing letters of indiscreet confession are written after nine or ten o'clock in the evening, and sent off before day returns to leer invidiously upon them. Few that remain open to catch our glance as we rise in the morning, survive the frigid criticism of dressing-time.

The subjects uppermost in the minds of the two women who had thus cooled from their fires, were not the visionary ones of the later hours, but the hard facts of their earlier conversation. After a remark that Cytherea need not assist her in dressing unless she wished to, Miss Aldclyffe said abruptly —

'I can tell that young man's name.' She looked keenly at Cytherea. 'It is Edward Springrove, my tenant's son.'

The inundation of colour upon the younger lady at hearing a name which to her was a world, handled as if it were only an atom, told Miss Aldclyffe that she had divined the truth at last.

‘Ah — it is he, is it?’ she continued. ‘Well, I wanted to know for practical reasons. His example shows that I was not so far wrong in my estimate of men after all, though I only generalised, and had no thought of him.’ This was perfectly true.

‘What do you mean?’ said Cytherea, visibly alarmed.

‘Mean? Why that all the world knows him to be engaged to be married, and that the wedding is soon to take place.’ She made the remark bluntly and superciliously, as if to obtain absolution at the hands of her family pride for the weak confidences of the night.

But even the frigidity of Miss Aldclyffe’s morning mood was overcome by the look of sick and blank despair which the carelessly uttered words had produced upon Cytherea’s face. She sank back into a chair, and buried her face in her hands.

‘Don’t be so foolish,’ said Miss Aldclyffe. ‘Come, make the best of it. I cannot upset the fact I have told you of, unfortunately. But I believe the match can be broken off.’

‘O no, no.’

‘Nonsense. I liked him much as a youth, and I like him now. I’ll help you to captivate and chain him down. I have got over my absurd feeling of last night in not wanting you ever to go away from me — of course, I could not expect such a thing as that. There, now I have said I’ll help you, and that’s enough. He’s tired of his first choice now that he’s been away from home for a while. The love that no outer attack can frighten away quails before its idol’s own homely ways; it is always so... Come, finish what you are doing if you are going to, and don’t be a little goose about such a trumpery affair as that.’

‘Who — is he engaged to?’ Cytherea inquired by a movement of her lips but no sound of her voice. But Miss Aldclyffe did not answer. It mattered not, Cytherea thought. Another woman — that was enough for her: curiosity was stunned.

She applied herself to the work of dressing, scarcely knowing how. Miss Aldclyffe went on: —

‘You were too easily won. I’d have made him or anybody else speak out before he should have kissed my face for his pleasure. But you are one of those precipitantly fond things who are yearning to throw away their hearts upon the first worthless fellow who says good-morning. In the first place, you shouldn’t have loved him so quickly: in the next, if you must have loved him off-hand, you should have concealed it. It tickled his vanity: “By Jove, that girl’s in love with me already!” he thought.’

To hasten away at the end of the toilet, to tell Mrs. Morris — who stood waiting in a little room prepared for her, with tea poured out, bread-and-butter cut into diaphanous slices, and eggs arranged — that she wanted no breakfast: then to shut herself alone in her bedroom, was her only thought. She was followed thither by the well-intentioned matron with a cup of tea and one piece of bread-and-butter on a tray, cheerfully insisting that she should eat it.

To those who grieve, innocent cheerfulness seems heartless levity. 'No, thank you, Mrs. Morris,' she said, keeping the door closed. Despite the incivility of the action, Cytherea could not bear to let a pleasant person see her face then.

Immediate revocation — even if revocation would be more effective by postponement — is the impulse of young wounded natures. Cytherea went to her blotting-book, took out the long letter so carefully written, so full of gushing remarks and tender hints, and sealed up so neatly with a little seal bearing 'Good Faith' as its motto, tore the missive into fifty pieces, and threw them into the grate. It was then the bitterest of anguishes to look upon some of the words she had so lovingly written, and see them existing only in mutilated forms without meaning — to feel that his eye would never read them, nobody ever know how ardently she had penned them.

Pity for one's self for being wasted is mostly present in these moods of abnegation.

The meaning of all his allusions, his abruptness in telling her of his love, his constraint at first, then his desperate manner of speaking, was clear. They must have been the last flickerings of a conscience not quite dead to all sense of perfidiousness and fickleness. Now he had gone to London: she would be dismissed from his memory, in the same way as Miss Aldclyffe had said. And here she was in Edward's own parish, reminded continually of him by what she saw and heard. The landscape, yesterday so much and so bright to her, was now but as the banquet-hall deserted — all gone but herself.

Miss Aldclyffe had wormed her secret out of her, and would now be continually mocking her for her trusting simplicity in believing him. It was altogether unbearable: she would not stay there.

She went downstairs and found Miss Aldclyffe had gone into the breakfast-room, but that Captain Aldclyffe, who rose later with increasing infirmities, had not yet made his appearance. Cytherea entered. Miss Aldclyffe was looking out of the window, watching a trail of white smoke along the distant landscape — signifying a passing train. At Cytherea's entry she turned and looked inquiry.

'I must tell you now,' began Cytherea, in a tremulous voice.

'Well, what?' Miss Aldclyffe said.

'I am not going to stay with you. I must go away — a very long way. I am very sorry, but indeed I can't remain!'

'Pooh — what shall we hear next?' Miss Aldclyffe surveyed Cytherea's face with leisurely criticism. 'You are breaking your heart again about that worthless young Springrove. I knew how it would be. It is as Hallam says of Juliet — what little reason you may have possessed originally has all been whirled away by this love. I shan't take this notice, mind.'

'Do let me go!'

Miss Aldclyffe took her new pet's hand, and said with severity, 'As to hindering you, if you are determined to go, of course that's absurd. But you are not now in a state of mind fit for deciding upon any such proceeding, and I shall not listen to what you have to say. Now, Cythie, come with me; we'll let this volcano burst and spend

itself, and after that we'll see what had better be done.' She took Cytherea into her workroom, opened a drawer, and drew forth a roll of linen.

'This is some embroidery I began one day, and now I should like it finished.'

She then preceded the maiden upstairs to Cytherea's own room. 'There,' she said, 'now sit down here, go on with this work, and remember one thing — that you are not to leave the room on any pretext whatever for two hours unless I send for you — I insist kindly, dear. Whilst you stitch — you are to stitch, recollect, and not go mooning out of the window — think over the whole matter, and get cooled; don't let the foolish love-affair prevent your thinking as a woman of the world. If at the end of that time you still say you must leave me, you may. I will have no more to say in the matter. Come, sit down, and promise to sit here the time I name.'

To hearts in a despairing mood, compulsion seems a relief; and docility was at all times natural to Cytherea. She promised, and sat down. Miss Aldclyffe shut the door upon her and retreated.

She sewed, stopped to think, shed a tear or two, recollected the articles of the treaty, and sewed again; and at length fell into a reverie which took no account whatever of the lapse of time.

4. TEN TO TWELVE O'CLOCK A.M.

A quarter of an hour might have passed when her thoughts became attracted from the past to the present by unwonted movements downstairs. She opened the door and listened.

There were hurryings along passages, opening and shutting of doors, trampling in the stable-yard. She went across into another bedroom, from which a view of the stable-yard could be obtained, and arrived there just in time to see the figure of the man who had driven her from the station vanishing down the coach-road on a black horse — galloping at the top of the animal's speed.

Another man went off in the direction of the village.

Whatever had occurred, it did not seem to be her duty to inquire or meddle with it, stranger and dependent as she was, unless she were requested to, especially after Miss Aldclyffe's strict charge to her. She sat down again, determined to let no idle curiosity influence her movements.

Her window commanded the front of the house; and the next thing she saw was a clergyman walk up and enter the door.

All was silent again till, a long time after the first man had left, he returned again on the same horse, now matted with sweat and trotting behind a carriage in which sat an elderly gentleman driven by a lad in livery. These came to the house, entered, and all was again the same as before.

The whole household — master, mistress, and servants — appeared to have forgotten the very existence of such a being as Cytherea. She almost wished she had not vowed to have no idle curiosity.

Half-an-hour later, the carriage drove off with the elderly gentleman, and two or three messengers left the house, speeding in various directions. Rustics in smock-frocks

began to hang about the road opposite the house, or lean against trees, looking idly at the windows and chimneys.

A tap came to Cytherea's door. She opened it to a young maid-servant.

'Miss Aldclyffe wishes to see you, ma'am.' Cytherea hastened down.

Miss Aldclyffe was standing on the hearthrug, her elbow on the mantel, her hand to her temples, her eyes on the ground; perfectly calm, but very pale.

'Cytherea,' she said in a whisper, 'come here.'

Cytherea went close.

'Something very serious has taken place,' she said again, and then paused, with a tremulous movement of her mouth.

'Yes,' said Cytherea.

'My father. He was found dead in his bed this morning.'

'Dead!' echoed the younger woman. It seemed impossible that the announcement could be true; that knowledge of so great a fact could be contained in a statement so small.

'Yes, dead,' murmured Miss Aldclyffe solemnly. 'He died alone, though within a few feet of me. The room we slept in is exactly over his own.'

Cytherea said hurriedly, 'Do they know at what hour?'

'The doctor says it must have been between two and three o'clock this morning.'

'Then I heard him!'

'Heard him?'

'Heard him die!'

'You heard him die? What did you hear?'

'A sound I heard once before in my life — at the deathbed of my mother. I could not identify it — though I recognized it. Then the dog howled: you remarked it. I did not think it worth while to tell you what I had heard a little earlier.' She looked agonized.

'It would have been useless,' said Miss Aldclyffe. 'All was over by that time.' She addressed herself as much as Cytherea when she continued, 'Is it a Providence who sent you here at this juncture that I might not be left entirely alone?'

Till this instant Miss Aldclyffe had forgotten the reason of Cytherea's seclusion in her own room. So had Cytherea herself. The fact now recurred to both in one moment.

'Do you still wish to go?' said Miss Aldclyffe anxiously.

'I don't want to go now,' Cytherea had remarked simultaneously with the other's question. She was pondering on the strange likeness which Miss Aldclyffe's bereavement bore to her own; it had the appearance of being still another call to her not to forsake this woman so linked to her life, for the sake of any trivial vexation.

Miss Aldclyffe held her almost as a lover would have held her, and said musingly —

'We get more and more into one groove. I now am left fatherless and motherless as you were.' Other ties lay behind in her thoughts, but she did not mention them.

'You loved your father, Cytherea, and wept for him?'

'Yes, I did. Poor papa!'

‘I was always at variance with mine, and can’t weep for him now! But you must stay here always, and make a better woman of me.’

The compact was thus sealed, and Cytherea, in spite of the failure of her advertisements, was installed as a veritable Companion. And, once more in the history of human endeavour, a position which it was impossible to reach by any direct attempt, was come to by the seeker’s swerving from the path, and regarding the original object as one of secondary importance.

VII. THE EVENTS OF EIGHTEEN DAYS

1. AUGUST THE SEVENTEENTH

The time of day was four o’clock in the afternoon. The place was the lady’s study or boudoir, Knapwater House. The person was Miss Aldclyffe sitting there alone, clothed in deep mourning.

The funeral of the old Captain had taken place, and his will had been read. It was very concise, and had been executed about five years previous to his death. It was attested by his solicitors, Messrs. Nyttleton and Tayling, of Lincoln’s Inn Fields. The whole of his estate, real and personal, was bequeathed to his daughter Cytherea, for her sole and absolute use, subject only to the payment of a legacy to the rector, their relative, and a few small amounts to the servants.

Miss Aldclyffe had not chosen the easiest chair of her boudoir to sit in, or even a chair of ordinary comfort, but an uncomfortable, high, narrow-backed, oak framed and seated chair, which was allowed to remain in the room only on the ground of being a companion in artistic quaintness to an old coffer beside it, and was never used except to stand in to reach for a book from the highest row of shelves. But she had sat erect in this chair for more than an hour, for the reason that she was utterly unconscious of what her actions and bodily feelings were. The chair had stood nearest her path on entering the room, and she had gone to it in a dream.

She sat in the attitude which denotes unflagging, intense, concentrated thought — as if she were cast in bronze. Her feet were together, her body bent a little forward, and quite unsupported by the back of the chair; her hands on her knees, her eyes fixed intently on the corner of a footstool.

At last she moved and tapped her fingers upon the table at her side. Her pent-up ideas had finally found some channel to advance in. Motions became more and more frequent as she laboured to carry further and further the problem which occupied her brain. She sat back and drew a long breath: she sat sideways and leant her forehead upon her hand. Later still she arose, walked up and down the room — at first abstractedly, with her features as firmly set as ever; but by degrees her brow relaxed, her footsteps became lighter and more leisurely; her head rode gracefully and was no longer bowed. She plumed herself like a swan after exertion.

‘Yes,’ she said aloud. ‘To get him here without letting him know that I have any other object than that of getting a useful man — that’s the difficulty — and that I think I can master.’

She rang for the new maid, a placid woman of forty with a few grey hairs.

‘Ask Miss Graye if she can come to me.’

Cytherea was not far off, and came in.

‘Do you know anything about architects and surveyors?’ said Miss Aldclyffe abruptly.

‘Know anything?’ replied Cytherea, poising herself on her toe to consider the compass of the question.

‘Yes — know anything,’ said Miss Aldclyffe.

‘Owen is an architect and surveyor’s draughtsman,’ the maiden said, and thought of somebody else who was likewise.

‘Yes! that’s why I asked you. What are the different kinds of work comprised in an architect’s practice? They lay out estates, and superintend the various works done upon them, I should think, among other things?’

‘Those are, more properly, a land or building steward’s duties — at least I have always imagined so. Country architects include those things in their practice; city architects don’t.’

‘I know that, child. But a steward’s is an indefinite fast and loose profession, it seems to me. Shouldn’t you think that a man who had been brought up as an architect would do for a steward?’

Cytherea had doubts whether an architect pure would do.

The chief pleasure connected with asking an opinion lies in not adopting it. Miss Aldclyffe replied decisively —

‘Nonsense; of course he would. Your brother Owen makes plans for country buildings — such as cottages, stables, homesteads, and so on?’

‘Yes; he does.’

‘And superintends the building of them?’

‘Yes; he will soon.’

‘And he surveys land?’

‘O yes.’

‘And he knows about hedges and ditches — how wide they ought to be, boundaries, levelling, planting trees to keep away the winds, measuring timber, houses for ninety-nine years, and such things?’

‘I have never heard him say that; but I think Mr. Gradfield does those things. Owen, I am afraid, is inexperienced as yet.’

‘Yes; your brother is not old enough for such a post yet, of course. And then there are rent-days, the audit and winding up of tradesmen’s accounts. I am afraid, Cytherea, you don’t know much more about the matter than I do myself.. I am going out just now,’ she continued. ‘I shall not want you to walk with me to-day. Run away till dinner-time.’

Miss Aldclyffe went out of doors, and down the steps to the lawn: then turning to the left, through a shrubbery, she opened a wicket and passed into a neglected and leafy carriage-drive, leading down the hill. This she followed till she reached the point of its greatest depression, which was also the lowest ground in the whole grove.

The trees here were so interlaced, and hung their branches so near the ground, that a whole summer's day was scarcely long enough to change the air pervading the spot from its normal state of coolness to even a temporary warmth. The unvarying freshness was helped by the nearness of the ground to the level of the springs, and by the presence of a deep, sluggish stream close by, equally well shaded by bushes and a high wall. Following the road, which now ran along at the margin of the stream, she came to an opening in the wall, on the other side of the water, revealing a large rectangular nook from which the stream proceeded, covered with froth, and accompanied by a dull roar. Two more steps, and she was opposite the nook, in full view of the cascade forming its further boundary. Over the top could be seen the bright outer sky in the form of a crescent, caused by the curve of a bridge across the rapids, and the trees above.

Beautiful as was the scene she did not look in that direction. The same standing-ground afforded another prospect, straight in the front, less sombre than the water on the right or the trees all around. The avenue and grove which flanked it abruptly terminated a few yards ahead, where the ground began to rise, and on the remote edge of the greensward thus laid open, stood all that remained of the original manor-house, to which the dark margin-line of the trees in the avenue formed an adequate and well-fitting frame. It was the picture thus presented that was now interesting Miss Aldclyffe — not artistically or historically, but practically — as regarded its fitness for adaptation to modern requirements.

In front, detached from everything else, rose the most ancient portion of the structure — an old arched gateway, flanked by the bases of two small towers, and nearly covered with creepers, which had clambered over the eaves of the sinking roof, and up the gable to the crest of the Aldclyffe family perched on the apex. Behind this, at a distance of ten or twenty yards, came the only portion of the main building that still existed — an Elizabethan fragment, consisting of as much as could be contained under three gables and a cross roof behind. Against the wall could be seen ragged lines indicating the form of other destroyed gables which had once joined it there. The mullioned and transomed windows, containing five or six lights, were mostly bricked up to the extent of two or three, and the remaining portion fitted with cottage window-frames carelessly inserted, to suit the purpose to which the old place was now applied, it being partitioned out into small rooms downstairs to form cottages for two labourers and their families; the upper portion was arranged as a storehouse for divers kinds of roots and fruit.

The owner of the picturesque spot, after her survey from this point, went up to the walls and walked into the old court, where the paving-stones were pushed sideways and upwards by the thrust of the grasses between them. Two or three little children, with their fingers in their mouths, came out to look at her, and then ran in to tell

their mothers in loud tones of secrecy that Miss Aldclyffe was coming. Miss Aldclyffe, however, did not come in. She concluded her survey of the exterior by making a complete circuit of the building; then turned into a nook a short distance off where round and square timber, a saw-pit, planks, grindstones, heaps of building stone and brick, explained that the spot was the centre of operations for the building work done on the estate.

She paused, and looked around. A man who had seen her from the window of the workshops behind, came out and respectfully lifted his hat to her. It was the first time she had been seen walking outside the house since her father's death.

'Strooden, could the Old House be made a decent residence of, without much trouble?' she inquired.

The mechanic considered, and spoke as each consideration completed itself.

'You don't forget, ma'am, that two-thirds of the place is already pulled down, or gone to ruin?'

'Yes; I know.'

'And that what's left may almost as well be, ma'am.'

'Why may it?'

'Twas so cut up inside when they made it into cottages, that the whole carcase is full of cracks.'

'Still by pulling down the inserted partitions, and adding a little outside, it could be made to answer the purpose of an ordinary six or eight-roomed house?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'About what would it cost?' was the question which had invariably come next in every communication of this kind to which the superintending workman had been a party during his whole experience. To his surprise, Miss Aldclyffe did not put it. The man thought her object in altering an old house must have been an unusually absorbing one not to prompt what was so instinctive in owners as hardly to require any prompting at all.

'Thank you: that's sufficient, Strooden,' she said. 'You will understand that it is not unlikely some alteration may be made here in a short time, with reference to the management of the affairs.'

Strooden said 'Yes,' in a complex voice, and looked uneasy.

'During the life of Captain Aldclyffe, with you as the foreman of works, and he himself as his own steward, everything worked well. But now it may be necessary to have a steward, whose management will encroach further upon things which have hitherto been left in your hands than did your late master's. What I mean is, that he will directly and in detail superintend all.'

'Then — I shall not be wanted, ma'am?' he faltered.

'O yes; if you like to stay on as foreman in the yard and workshops only. I should be sorry to lose you. However, you had better consider. I will send for you in a few days.'

Leaving him to suspense, and all the ills that came in its train — distracted application to his duties, and an undefined number of sleepless nights and untasted dinners, Miss Aldclyffe looked at her watch and returned to the House. She was about to keep an appointment with her solicitor, Mr. Nyttleton, who had been to Budmouth, and was coming to Knapwater on his way back to London.

2. AUGUST THE TWENTIETH

On the Saturday subsequent to Mr. Nyttleton's visit to Knapwater House, the subjoined advertisement appeared in the *Field* and the *Builder* newspapers: —

'LAND STEWARD.

'A gentleman of integrity and professional skill is required immediately for the MANAGEMENT of an ESTATE, containing about 1000 acres, upon which agricultural improvements and the erection of buildings are contemplated. He must be a man of superior education, unmarried, and not more than thirty years of age. Considerable preference will be shown for one who possesses an artistic as well as a practical knowledge of planning and laying out. The remuneration will consist of a salary of 220 pounds, with the old manor-house as a residence — Address Messrs. Nyttleton and Tayling, solicitors, Lincoln's Inn Fields.'

A copy of each paper was sent to Miss Aldclyffe on the day of publication. The same evening she told Cytherea that she was advertising for a steward, who would live at the old manor-house, showing her the papers containing the announcement.

What was the drift of that remark? thought the maiden; or was it merely made to her in confidential intercourse, as other arrangements were told her daily. Yet it seemed to have more meaning than common. She remembered the conversation about architects and surveyors, and her brother Owen. Miss Aldclyffe knew that his situation was precarious, that he was well educated and practical, and was applying himself heart and soul to the details of the profession and all connected with it. Miss Aldclyffe might be ready to take him if he could compete successfully with others who would reply. She hazarded a question:

'Would it be desirable for Owen to answer it?'

'Not at all,' said Miss Aldclyffe peremptorily.

A flat answer of this kind had ceased to alarm Cytherea. Miss Aldclyffe's blunt mood was not her worst. Cytherea thought of another man, whose name, in spite of resolves, tears, renunciations and injured pride, lingered in her ears like an old familiar strain. That man was qualified for a stewardship under a king.

'Would it be of any use if Edward Springrove were to answer it?' she said, resolutely enunciating the name.

'None whatever,' replied Miss Aldclyffe, again in the same decided tone.

'You are very unkind to speak in that way.'

'Now don't pout like a goosie, as you are. I don't want men like either of them, for, of course, I must look to the good of the estate rather than to that of any individual. The man I want must have been more specially educated. I have told you that we are going to London next week; it is mostly on this account.'

Cytherea found that she had mistaken the drift of Miss Aldclyffe's peculiar explicitness on the subject of advertising, and wrote to tell her brother that if he saw the notice it would be useless to reply.

3. AUGUST THE TWENTY-FIFTH

Five days after the above-mentioned dialogue took place they went to London, and, with scarcely a minute's pause, to the solicitors' offices in Lincoln's Inn Fields.

They alighted opposite one of the characteristic entrances about the place — a gate which was never, and could never be, closed, flanked by lamp-standards carrying no lamp. Rust was the only active agent to be seen there at this time of the day and year. The palings along the front were rusted away at their base to the thinness of wires, and the successive coats of paint, with which they were overlaid in bygone days, had been completely undermined by the same insidious canker, which lifted off the paint in flakes, leaving the raw surface of the iron on palings, standards, and gate hinges, of a staring blood-red.

But once inside the railings the picture changed. The court and offices were a complete contrast to the grand ruin of the outwork which enclosed them. Well-painted respectability extended over, within, and around the doorstep; and in the carefully swept yard not a particle of dust was visible.

Mr. Nyttleton, who had just come up from Margate, where he was staying with his family, was standing at the top of his own staircase as the pair ascended. He politely took them inside.

'Is there a comfortable room in which this young lady can sit during our interview?' said Miss Aldclyffe.

It was rather a favourite habit of hers to make much of Cytherea when they were out, and snub her for it afterwards when they got home.

'Certainly — Mr. Tayling's.' Cytherea was shown into an inner room.

Social definitions are all made relatively: an absolute datum is only imagined. The small gentry about Knapwater seemed unpractised to Miss Aldclyffe, Miss Aldclyffe herself seemed unpractised to Mr. Nyttleton's experienced old eyes.

'Now then,' the lady said, when she was alone with the lawyer; 'what is the result of our advertisement?'

It was late summer; the estate-agency, building, engineering, and surveying worlds were dull. There were forty-five replies to the advertisement.

Mr. Nyttleton spread them one by one before Miss Aldclyffe. 'You will probably like to read some of them yourself, madam?' he said.

'Yes, certainly,' said she.

'I will not trouble you with those which are from persons manifestly unfit at first sight,' he continued; and began selecting from the heap twos and threes which he had marked, collecting others into his hand.

'The man we want lies among these, if my judgment doesn't deceive me, and from them it would be advisable to select a certain number to be communicated with.'

'I should like to see every one — only just to glance them over — exactly as they came,' she said suavely.

He looked as if he thought this a waste of his time, but dismissing his sentiment unfolded each singly and laid it before her. As he laid them out, it struck him that she studied them quite as rapidly as he could spread them. He slyly glanced up from the outer corner of his eye to hers, and noticed that all she did was look at the name at the bottom of the letter, and then put the enclosure aside without further ceremony. He thought this an odd way of inquiring into the merits of forty-five men who at considerable trouble gave in detail reasons why they believed themselves well qualified for a certain post. She came to the final one, and put it down with the rest.

Then the lady said that in her opinion it would be best to get as many replies as they possibly could before selecting — 'to give us a wider choice. What do you think, Mr. Nyttleton?'

It seemed to him, he said, that a greater number than those they already had would scarcely be necessary, and if they waited for more, there would be this disadvantage attending it, that some of those they now could command would possibly not be available.

'Never mind, we will run that risk,' said Miss Aldclyffe. 'Let the advertisement be inserted once more, and then we will certainly settle the matter.'

Mr. Nyttleton bowed, and seemed to think Miss Aldclyffe, for a single woman, and one who till so very recently had never concerned herself with business of any kind, a very meddlesome client. But she was rich, and handsome still. 'She's a new broom in estate-management as yet,' he thought. 'She will soon get tired of this,' and he parted from her without a sentiment which could mar his habitual blandness.

The two ladies then proceeded westward. Dismissing the cab in Waterloo Place, they went along Pall Mall on foot, where in place of the usual well-dressed clubbists — rubicund with alcohol — were to be seen, in linen pinafores, flocks of house-painters pallid from white lead. When they had reached the Green Park, Cytherea proposed that they should sit down awhile under the young elms at the brow of the hill. This they did — the growl of Piccadilly on their left hand — the monastic seclusion of the Palace on their right: before them, the clock tower of the Houses of Parliament, standing forth with a metallic lustre against a livid Lambeth sky.

Miss Aldclyffe still carried in her hand a copy of the newspaper, and while Cytherea had been interesting herself in the picture around, glanced again at the advertisement.

She heaved a slight sigh, and began to fold it up again. In the action her eye caught sight of two consecutive advertisements on the cover, one relating to some lecture on Art, and addressed to members of the Institute of Architects. The other emanated from the same source, but was addressed to the public, and stated that the exhibition of drawings at the Institute's rooms would close at the end of that week.

Her eye lighted up. She sent Cytherea back to the hotel in a cab, then turned round by Piccadilly into Bond Street, and proceeded to the rooms of the Institute. The secretary was sitting in the lobby. After making her payment, and looking at a

few of the drawings on the walls, in the company of three gentlemen, the only other visitors to the exhibition, she turned back and asked if she might be allowed to see a list of the members. She was a little connected with the architectural world, she said, with a smile, and was interested in some of the names.

‘Here it is, madam,’ he replied, politely handing her a pamphlet containing the names.

Miss Aldclyffe turned the leaves till she came to the letter M. The name she hoped to find there was there, with the address appended, as was the case with all the rest.

The address was at some chambers in a street not far from Charing Cross. ‘Chambers,’ as a residence, had always been assumed by the lady to imply the condition of a bachelor. She murmured two words, ‘There still.’

Another request had yet to be made, but it was of a more noticeable kind than the first, and might compromise the secrecy with which she wished to act throughout this episode. Her object was to get one of the envelopes lying on the secretary’s table, stamped with the die of the Institute; and in order to get it she was about to ask if she might write a note.

But the secretary’s back chanced to be turned, and he now went towards one of the men at the other end of the room, who had called him to ask some question relating to an etching on the wall. Quick as thought, Miss Aldclyffe stood before the table, slipped her hand behind her, took one of the envelopes and put it in her pocket.

She sauntered round the rooms for two or three minutes longer, then withdrew and returned to her hotel.

Here she cut the Knapwater advertisement from the paper, put it into the envelope she had stolen, embossed with the society’s stamp, and directed it in a round clerkly hand to the address she had seen in the list of members’ names submitted to her: —

AENEAS MANSTON, ESQ.,
WYKEHAM CHAMBERS,
SPRING GARDENS.

This ended her first day’s work in London.

4. FROM AUGUST THE TWENTY-SIXTH TO SEPTEMBER THE FIRST

The two Cythereas continued at the Westminster Hotel, Miss Aldclyffe informing her companion that business would detain them in London another week. The days passed as slowly and quietly as days can pass in a city at that time of the year, the shuttered windows about the squares and terraces confronting their eyes like the white and sightless orbs of blind men. On Thursday Mr. Nyttleton called, bringing the whole number of replies to the advertisement. Cytherea was present at the interview, by Miss Aldclyffe’s request — either from whim or design.

Ten additional letters were the result of the second week’s insertion, making fifty-five in all. Miss Aldclyffe looked them over as before. One was signed —

AENEAS MANSTON, 133, TURNGATE STREET,
LIVERPOOL.

‘Now, then, Mr. Nyttleton, will you make a selection, and I will add one or two,’ Miss Aldclyffe said.

Mr. Nyttleton scanned the whole heap of letters, testimonials, and references, sorting them into two heaps. Manston’s missive, after a mere glance, was thrown amongst the summarily rejected ones.

Miss Aldclyffe read, or pretended to read after the lawyer. When he had finished, five lay in the group he had selected. ‘Would you like to add to the number?’ he said, turning to the lady.

‘No,’ she said carelessly. ‘Well, two or three additional ones rather took my fancy,’ she added, searching for some in the larger collection.

She drew out three. One was Manston’s.

‘These eight, then, shall be communicated with,’ said the lawyer, taking up the eight letters and placing them by themselves.

They stood up. ‘If I myself, Miss Aldclyffe, were only concerned personally,’ he said, in an off-hand way, and holding up a letter singly, ‘I should choose this man unhesitatingly. He writes honestly, is not afraid to name what he does not consider himself well acquainted with — a rare thing to find in answers to advertisements; he is well recommended, and possesses some qualities rarely found in combination. Oddly enough, he is not really a steward. He was bred a farmer, studied building affairs, served on an estate for some time, then went with an architect, and is now well qualified as architect, estate agent, and surveyor. That man is sure to have a fine head for a manor like yours.’ He tapped the letter as he spoke. ‘Yes, I should choose him without hesitation — speaking personally.’

‘And I think,’ she said artificially, ‘I should choose this one as a matter of mere personal whim, which, of course, can’t be given way to when practical questions have to be considered.’

Cytherea, after looking out of the window, and then at the newspapers, had become interested in the proceedings between the clever Miss Aldclyffe and the keen old lawyer, which reminded her of a game at cards. She looked inquiringly at the two letters — one in Miss Aldclyffe’s hand, the other in Mr. Nyttleton’s.

‘What is the name of your man?’ said Miss Aldclyffe.

‘His name — ’ said the lawyer, looking down the page; ‘what is his name? — it is Edward Springrove.’

Miss Aldclyffe glanced towards Cytherea, who was getting red and pale by turns. She looked imploringly at Miss Aldclyffe.

‘The name of my man,’ said Miss Aldclyffe, looking at her letter in turn; ‘is, I think — yes — Aeneas Manston.’

5. SEPTEMBER THE THIRD

The next morning but one was appointed for the interviews, which were to be at the lawyer’s offices. Mr. Nyttleton and Mr. Tayling were both in town for the day, and the candidates were admitted one by one into a private room. In the window recess was seated Miss Aldclyffe, wearing her veil down.

The lawyer had, in his letters to the selected number, timed each candidate at an interval of ten or fifteen minutes from those preceding and following. They were shown in as they arrived, and had short conversations with Mr. Nyttleton — terse, and to the point. Miss Aldclyffe neither moved nor spoke during this proceeding; it might have been supposed that she was quite unmindful of it, had it not been for what was revealed by a keen penetration of the veil covering her countenance — the rays from two bright black eyes, directed towards the lawyer and his interlocutor.

Springrove came fifth; Manston seventh. When the examination of all was ended, and the last man had retired, Nyttleton, again as at the former time, blandly asked his client which of the eight she personally preferred. ‘I still think the fifth we spoke to, Springrove, the man whose letter I pounced upon at first, to be by far the best qualified, in short, most suitable generally.’

‘I am sorry to say that I differ from you; I lean to my first notion still — that Mr. — Mr. Manston is most desirable in tone and bearing, and even specifically; I think he would suit me best in the long-run.’

Mr. Nyttleton looked out of the window at the whitened wall of the court.

‘Of course, madam, your opinion may be perfectly sound and reliable; a sort of instinct, I know, often leads ladies by a short cut to conclusions truer than those come to by men after laborious round-about calculations, based on long experience. I must say I shouldn’t recommend him.’

‘Why, pray?’

‘Well, let us look first at his letter of answer to the advertisement. He didn’t reply till the last insertion; that’s one thing. His letter is bold and frank in tone, so bold and frank that the second thought after reading it is that not honesty, but unscrupulousness of conscience dictated it. It is written in an indifferent mood, as if he felt that he was humbugging us in his statement that he was the right man for such an office, that he tried hard to get it only as a matter of form which required that he should neglect no opportunity that came in his way.’

‘You may be right, Mr. Nyttleton, but I don’t quite see the grounds of your reasoning.’

‘He has been, as you perceive, almost entirely used to the office duties of a city architect, the experience we don’t want. You want a man whose acquaintance with rural landed properties is more practical and closer — somebody who, if he has not filled exactly such an office before, has lived a country life, knows the ins and outs of country tenancies, building, farming, and so on.’

‘He’s by far the most intellectual looking of them all.’

‘Yes; he may be — your opinion, Miss Aldclyffe, is worth more than mine in that matter. And more than you say, he is a man of parts — his brain power would soon enable him to master details and fit him for the post, I don’t much doubt that. But to speak clearly’ (here his words started off at a jog-trot) ‘I wouldn’t run the risk of placing the management of an estate of mine in his hands on any account whatever. There, that’s flat and plain, madam.’

‘But, definitely,’ she said, with a show of impatience, ‘what is your reason?’

‘He is a voluptuary with activity; which is a very bad form of man — as bad as it is rare.’

‘Oh. Thank you for your explicit statement, Mr. Nyttleton,’ said Miss Aldclyffe, starting a little and flushing with displeasure.

Mr. Nyttleton nodded slightly, as a sort of neutral motion, simply signifying a receipt of the information, good or bad.

‘And I really think it is hardly worth while to trouble you further in this,’ continued the lady. ‘He’s quite good enough for a little insignificant place like mine at Knapwater; and I know that I could not get on with one of the others for a single month. We’ll try him.’

‘Certainly, Miss Aldclyffe,’ said the lawyer. And Mr. Manston was written to, to the effect that he was the successful competitor.

‘Did you see how unmistakably her temper was getting the better of her, that minute you were in the room?’ said Nyttleton to Tayling, when their client had left the house. Nyttleton was a man who surveyed everybody’s character in a sunless and shadowless northern light. A culpable slyness, which marked him as a boy, had been moulded by Time, the Improver, into honourable circumspection.

We frequently find that the quality which, conjoined with the simplicity of the child, is vice, is virtue when it pervades the knowledge of the man.

‘She was as near as damn-it to boiling over when I added up her man,’ continued Nyttleton. ‘His handsome face is his qualification in her eyes. They have met before; I saw that.’

‘He didn’t seem conscious of it,’ said the junior.

‘He didn’t. That was rather puzzling to me. But still, if ever a woman’s face spoke out plainly that she was in love with a man, hers did that she was with him. Poor old maid, she’s almost old enough to be his mother. If that Manston’s a schemer he’ll marry her, as sure as I am Nyttleton. Let’s hope he’s honest, however.’

‘I don’t think she’s in love with him,’ said Tayling. He had seen but little of the pair, and yet he could not reconcile what he had noticed in Miss Aldclyffe’s behaviour with the idea that it was the bearing of a woman towards her lover.

‘Well, your experience of the fiery phenomenon is more recent than mine,’ rejoined Nyttleton carelessly. ‘And you may remember the nature of it best.’

VIII. THE EVENTS OF EIGHTEEN DAYS

1. FROM THE THIRD TO THE NINETEENTH OF SEPTEMBER

Miss Aldclyffe’s tenderness towards Cytherea, between the hours of her irascibility, increased till it became no less than doting fondness. Like Nature in the tropics, with her hurricanes and the subsequent luxuriant vegetation effacing their ravages, Miss Aldclyffe compensated for her outbursts by excess of generosity afterwards. She

seemed to be completely won out of herself by close contact with a young woman whose modesty was absolutely unimpaired, and whose artlessness was as perfect as was compatible with the complexity necessary to produce the due charm of womanhood. Cytherea, on her part, perceived with honest satisfaction that her influence for good over Miss Aldclyffe was considerable. Ideas and habits peculiar to the younger, which the elder lady had originally imitated as a mere whim, she grew in course of time to take a positive delight in. Among others were evening and morning prayers, dreaming over out-door scenes, learning a verse from some poem whilst dressing.

Yet try to force her sympathies as much as she would, Cytherea could feel no more than thankful for this, even if she always felt as much as thankful. The mysterious cloud hanging over the past life of her companion, of which the uncertain light already thrown upon it only seemed to render still darker the unpenetrated remainder, nourished in her a feeling which was scarcely too slight to be called dread. She would have infinitely preferred to be treated distantly, as the mere dependent, by such a changeable nature — like a fountain, always herself, yet always another. That a crime of any deep dye had ever been perpetrated or participated in by her namesake, she would not believe; but the reckless adventuring of the lady's youth seemed connected with deeds of darkness rather than of light.

Sometimes Miss Aldclyffe appeared to be on the point of making some absorbing confidence, but reflection invariably restrained her. Cytherea hoped that such a confidence would come with time, and that she might thus be a means of soothing a mind which had obviously known extreme suffering.

But Miss Aldclyffe's reticence concerning her past was not imitated by Cytherea. Though she never disclosed the one fact of her knowledge that the love-suit between Miss Aldclyffe and her father terminated abnormally, the maiden's natural ingenuousness on subjects not set down for special guard had enabled Miss Aldclyffe to worm from her, fragment by fragment, every detail of her father's history. Cytherea saw how deeply Miss Aldclyffe sympathized — and it compensated her, to some extent, for the hasty resentments of other times.

Thus uncertainly she lived on. It was perceived by the servants of the House that some secret bond of connection existed between Miss Aldclyffe and her companion. But they were woman and woman, not woman and man, the facts were ethereal and refined, and so they could not be worked up into a taking story. Whether, as old critics disputed, a supernatural machinery be necessary to an epic or no, an ungodly machinery is decidedly necessary to a scandal.

Another letter had come to her from Edward — very short, but full of entreaty, asking why she would not write just one line — just one line of cold friendship at least? She then allowed herself to think, little by little, whether she had not perhaps been too harsh with him; and at last wondered if he were really much to blame for being engaged to another woman. 'Ah, Brain, there is one in me stronger than you!' she said. The young maid now continually pulled out his letter, read it and re-read it, almost crying with pity the while, to think what wretched suspense he must be

enduring at her silence, till her heart chid her for her cruelty. She felt that she must send him a line — one little line — just a wee line to keep him alive, poor thing; sighing like Donna Clara —

‘Ah, were he now before me,
In spite of injured pride,
I fear my eyes would pardon
Before my tongue could chide.’

2. SEPTEMBER THE TWENTIETH. THREE TO FOUR P.M.

It was the third week in September, about five weeks after Cytherea’s arrival, when Miss Aldclyffe requested her one day to go through the village of Carriford and assist herself in collecting the subscriptions made by some of the inhabitants of the parish to a religious society she patronized. Miss Aldclyffe formed one of what was called a Ladies’ Association, each member of which collected tributary streams of shillings from her inferiors, to add to her own pound at the end.

Miss Aldclyffe took particular interest in Cytherea’s appearance that afternoon, and the object of her attention was, indeed, gratifying to look at. The sight of the lithe girl, set off by an airy dress, coquettish jacket, flexible hat, a ray of starlight in each eye and a war of lilies and roses in each cheek, was a palpable pleasure to the mistress of the mansion, yet a pleasure which appeared to partake less of the nature of affectionate satisfaction than of mental gratification.

Eight names were printed in the report as belonging to Miss Aldclyffe’s list, with the amount of subscription-money attached to each.

‘I will collect the first four, whilst you do the same with the last four,’ said Miss Aldclyffe.

The names of two tradespeople stood first in Cytherea’s share: then came a Miss Hinton: last of all in the printed list was Mr. Springrove the elder. Underneath his name was pencilled, in Miss Aldclyffe’s handwriting, ‘Mr. Manston.’

Manston had arrived on the estate, in the capacity of steward, three or four days previously, and occupied the old manor-house, which had been altered and repaired for his reception.

‘Call on Mr. Manston,’ said the lady impressively, looking at the name written under Cytherea’s portion of the list.

‘But he does not subscribe yet?’

‘I know it; but call and leave him a report. Don’t forget it.’

‘Say you would be pleased if he would subscribe?’

‘Yes — say I should be pleased if he would,’ repeated Miss Aldclyffe, smiling. ‘Good-bye. Don’t hurry in your walk. If you can’t get easily through your task to-day put off some of it till to-morrow.’

Each then started on her rounds: Cytherea going in the first place to the old manor-house. Mr. Manston was not indoors, which was a relief to her. She called then on the two gentleman-farmers’ wives, who soon transacted their business with her, frigidly

indifferent to her personality. A person who socially is nothing is thought less of by people who are not much than by those who are a great deal.

She then turned towards Peakhill Cottage, the residence of Miss Hinton, who lived there happily enough, with an elderly servant and a house-dog as companions. Her father, and last remaining parent, had retired thither four years before this time, after having filled the post of editor to the Casterbridge Chronicle for eighteen or twenty years. There he died soon after, and though comparatively a poor man, he left his daughter sufficiently well provided for as a modest fundholder and claimant of sundry small sums in dividends to maintain herself as mistress at Peakhill.

At Cytherea's knock an inner door was heard to open and close, and footsteps crossed the passage hesitatingly. The next minute Cytherea stood face to face with the lady herself.

Adelaide Hinton was about nine-and-twenty years of age. Her hair was plentiful, like Cytherea's own; her teeth equalled Cytherea's in regularity and whiteness. But she was much paler, and had features too transparent to be in place among household surroundings. Her mouth expressed love less forcibly than Cytherea's, and, as a natural result of her greater maturity, her tread was less elastic, and she was more self-possessed.

She had been a girl of that kind which mothers praise as not forward, by way of contrast, when disparaging those warmer ones with whom loving is an end and not a means. Men of forty, too, said of her, 'a good sensible wife for any man, if she cares to marry,' the caring to marry being thrown in as the vaguest hypothesis, because she was so practical. Yet it would be singular if, in such cases, the important subject of marriage should be excluded from manipulation by hands that are ready for practical performance in every domestic concern besides.

Cytherea was an acquisition, and the greeting was hearty.

'Good afternoon! O yes — Miss Graye, from Miss Aldclyffe's. I have seen you at church, and I am so glad you have called! Come in. I wonder if I have change enough to pay my subscription.' She spoke girlishly.

Adelaide, when in the company of a younger woman, always levelled herself down to that younger woman's age from a sense of justice to herself — as if, though not her own age at common law, it was in equity.

'It doesn't matter. I'll come again.'

'Yes, do at any time; not only on this errand. But you must step in for a minute. Do.'

'I have been wanting to come for several weeks.'

'That's right. Now you must see my house — lonely, isn't it, for a single person? People said it was odd for a young woman like me to keep on a house; but what did I care? If you knew the pleasure of locking up your own door, with the sensation that you reigned supreme inside it, you would say it was worth the risk of being called odd. Mr. Springrove attends to my gardening, the dog attends to robbers, and whenever there is a snake or toad to kill, Jane does it.'

‘How nice! It is better than living in a town.’

‘Far better. A town makes a cynic of me.’

The remark recalled, somewhat startlingly, to Cytherea’s mind, that Edward had used those very words to herself one evening at Budmouth.

Miss Hinton opened an interior door and led her visitor into a small drawing-room commanding a view of the country for miles.

The missionary business was soon settled; but the chat continued.

‘How lonely it must be here at night!’ said Cytherea. ‘Aren’t you afraid?’

‘At first I was, slightly. But I got used to the solitude. And you know a sort of commonsense will creep even into timidity. I say to myself sometimes at night, “If I were anybody but a harmless woman, not worth the trouble of a worm’s ghost to appear to me, I should think that every sound I hear was a spirit.” But you must see all over my house.’

Cytherea was highly interested in seeing.

‘I say you must do this, and you must do that, as if you were a child,’ remarked Adelaide. ‘A privileged friend of mine tells me this use of the imperative comes of being so constantly in nobody’s society but my own.’

‘Ah, yes. I suppose she is right.’

Cytherea called the friend ‘she’ by a rule of ladylike practice; for a woman’s ‘friend’ is delicately assumed by another friend to be of their own sex in the absence of knowledge to the contrary; just as cats are called she’s until they prove themselves he’s.

Miss Hinton laughed mysteriously.

‘I get a humorous reproof for it now and then, I assure you,’ she continued.

“Humorous reproof:” that’s not from a woman: who can reprove humorously but a man?” was the groove of Cytherea’s thought at the remark. ‘Your brother reproves you, I expect,’ said that innocent young lady.

‘No,’ said Miss Hinton, with a candid air. “Tis only a professional man I am acquainted with.’ She looked out of the window.

Women are persistently imitative. No sooner did a thought flash through Cytherea’s mind that the man was a lover than she became a Miss Aldclyffe in a mild form.

‘I imagine he’s a lover,’ she said.

Miss Hinton smiled a smile of experience in that line.

Few women, if taxed with having an admirer, are so free from vanity as to deny the impeachment, even if it is utterly untrue. When it does happen to be true, they look pityingly away from the person who is so benighted as to have got no further than suspecting it.

‘There now — Miss Hinton; you are engaged to be married!’ said Cytherea accusingly.

Adelaide nodded her head practically. ‘Well, yes, I am,’ she said.

The word ‘engaged’ had no sooner passed Cytherea’s lips than the sound of it — the mere sound of her own lips — carried her mind to the time and circumstances under which Miss Aldclyffe had used it towards herself. A sickening thought followed

— based but on a mere surmise; yet its presence took every other idea away from Cytherea's mind. Miss Hinton had used Edward's words about towns; she mentioned Mr. Springrove as attending to her garden. It could not be that Edward was the man! that Miss Aldclyffe had planned to reveal her rival thus!

'Are you going to be married soon?' she inquired, with a steadiness the result of a sort of fascination, but apparently of indifference.

'Not very soon — still, soon.'

'Ah-ha! In less than three months?' said Cytherea.

'Two.'

Now that the subject was well in hand, Adelaide wanted no more prompting. 'You won't tell anybody if I show you something?' she said, with eager mystery.

'O no, nobody. But does he live in this parish?'

'No.'

Nothing proved yet.

'What's his name?' said Cytherea flatly. Her breath and heart had begun their old tricks, and came and went hotly. Miss Hinton could not see her face.

'What do you think?' said Miss Hinton.

'George?' said Cytherea, with deceitful agony.

'No,' said Adelaide. 'But now, you shall see him first; come here;' and she led the way upstairs into her bedroom. There, standing on the dressing table in a little frame, was the unconscious portrait of Edward Springrove.

'There he is,' Miss Hinton said, and a silence ensued.

'Are you very fond of him?' continued the miserable Cytherea at length.

'Yes, of course I am,' her companion replied, but in the tone of one who 'lived in Abraham's bosom all the year,' and was therefore untouched by solemn thought at the fact. 'He's my cousin — a native of this village. We were engaged before my father's death left me so lonely. I was only twenty, and a much greater belle than I am now. We know each other thoroughly, as you may imagine. I give him a little sermonizing now and then.'

'Why?'

'O, it's only in fun. He's very naughty sometimes — not really, you know — but he will look at any pretty face when he sees it.'

Storing up this statement of his susceptibility as another item to be miserable upon when she had time, 'How do you know that?' Cytherea asked, with a swelling heart.

'Well, you know how things do come to women's ears. He used to live at Budmouth as an assistant-architect, and I found out that a young giddy thing of a girl who lives there somewhere took his fancy for a day or two. But I don't feel jealous at all — our engagement is so matter-of-fact that neither of us can be jealous. And it was a mere flirtation — she was too silly for him. He's fond of rowing, and kindly gave her an airing for an evening or two. I'll warrant they talked the most unmitigated rubbish under the sun — all shallowness and pastime, just as everything is at watering places

— neither of them caring a bit for the other — she giggling like a goose all the time — ’

Concentrated essence of woman pervaded the room rather than air. ‘She didn’t! and it wasn’t shallowness!’ Cytherea burst out, with brimming eyes. ‘‘Twas deep deceit on one side, and entire confidence on the other — yes, it was!’ The pent-up emotion had swollen and swollen inside the young thing till the dam could no longer embay it. The instant the words were out she would have given worlds to have been able to recall them.

‘Do you know her — or him?’ said Miss Hinton, starting with suspicion at the warmth shown.

The two rivals had now lost their personality quite. There was the same keen brightness of eye, the same movement of the mouth, the same mind in both, as they looked doubtingly and excitedly at each other. As is invariably the case with women when a man they care for is the subject of an excitement among them, the situation abstracted the differences which distinguished them as individuals, and left only the properties common to them as atoms of a sex.

Cytherea caught at the chance afforded her of not betraying herself. ‘Yes, I know her,’ she said.

‘Well,’ said Miss Hinton, ‘I am really vexed if my speaking so lightly of any friend of yours has hurt your feelings, but — ’

‘O, never mind,’ Cytherea returned; ‘it doesn’t matter, Miss Hinton. I think I must leave you now. I have to call at other places. Yes — I must go.’

Miss Hinton, in a perplexed state of mind, showed her visitor politely downstairs to the door. Here Cytherea bade her a hurried adieu, and flitted down the garden into the lane.

She persevered in her duties with a wayward pleasure in giving herself misery, as was her wont. Mr. Springrove’s name was next on the list, and she turned towards his dwelling, the Three Tranters Inn.

3. FOUR TO FIVE P.M.

The cottages along Carriford village street were not so close but that on one side or other of the road was always a hedge of hawthorn or privet, over or through which could be seen gardens or orchards rich with produce. It was about the middle of the early apple-harvest, and the laden trees were shaken at intervals by the gatherers; the soft pattering of the falling crop upon the grassy ground being diversified by the loud rattle of vagrant ones upon a rail, hencoop, basket, or lean-to roof, or upon the rounded and stooping backs of the collectors — mostly children, who would have cried bitterly at receiving such a smart blow from any other quarter, but smilingly assumed it to be but fun in apples.

The Three Tranters Inn, a many-gabled, mediaeval building, constructed almost entirely of timber, plaster, and thatch, stood close to the line of the roadside, almost opposite the churchyard, and was connected with a row of cottages on the left by thatched outbuildings. It was an uncommonly characteristic and handsome specimen

of the genuine roadside inn of bygone times; and standing on one of the great highways in this part of England, had in its time been the scene of as much of what is now looked upon as the romantic and genial experience of stage-coach travelling as any halting-place in the country. The railway had absorbed the whole stream of traffic which formerly flowed through the village and along by the ancient door of the inn, reducing the empty-handed landlord, who used only to farm a few fields at the back of the house, to the necessity of eking out his attenuated income by increasing the extent of his agricultural business if he would still maintain his social standing. Next to the general stillness pervading the spot, the long line of outbuildings adjoining the house was the most striking and saddening witness to the passed-away fortunes of the Three Tranters Inn. It was the bulk of the original stabling, and where once the hoofs of two-score horses had daily rattled over the stony yard, to and from the stalls within, thick grass now grew, whilst the line of roofs — once so straight — over the decayed stalls, had sunk into vast hollows till they seemed like the cheeks of toothless age.

On a green plot at the other end of the building grew two or three large, wide-spreading elm-trees, from which the sign was suspended — representing the three men called tranters (irregular carriers), standing side by side, and exactly alike to a hair's-breadth, the grain of the wood and joints of the boards being visible through the thin paint depicting their forms, which were still further disfigured by red stains running downwards from the rusty nails above.

Under the trees now stood a cider-mill and press, and upon the spot sheltered by the boughs were gathered Mr. Springrove himself, his men, the parish clerk, two or three other men, grinders and supernumeraries, a woman with an infant in her arms, a flock of pigeons, and some little boys with straws in their mouths, endeavouring, whenever the men's backs were turned, to get a sip of the sweet juice issuing from the vat.

Edward Springrove the elder, the landlord, now more particularly a farmer, and for two months in the year a cider-maker, was an employer of labour of the old school, who worked himself among his men. He was now engaged in packing the pomace into horsehair bags with a rammer, and Gad Weedy, his man, was occupied in shovelling up more from a tub at his side. The shovel shone like silver from the action of the juice, and ever and anon, in its motion to and fro, caught the rays of the declining sun and reflected them in bristling stars of light.

Mr. Springrove had been too young a man when the pristine days of the Three Tranters had departed for ever to have much of the host left in him now. He was a poet with a rough skin: one whose sturdiness was more the result of external circumstances than of intrinsic nature. Too kindly constituted to be very provident, he was yet not imprudent. He had a quiet humorousness of disposition, not out of keeping with a frequent melancholy, the general expression of his countenance being one of abstraction. Like Walt Whitman he felt as his years increased —

'I foresee too much; it means more than I thought.'

On the present occasion he wore gaiters and a leathern apron, and worked with his shirt-sleeves rolled up beyond his elbows, disclosing solid and fleshy rather than muscular arms. They were stained by the cider, and two or three brown apple-pips from the pomace he was handling were to be seen sticking on them here and there.

The other prominent figure was that of Richard Crickett, the parish clerk, a kind of Bowdlerized rake, who ate only as much as a woman, and had the rheumatism in his left hand. The remainder of the group, brown-faced peasants, wore smock-frocks embroidered on the shoulders with hearts and diamonds, and were girt round their middle with a strap, another being worn round the right wrist.

‘And have you seen the steward, Mr. Springrove?’ said the clerk.

‘Just a glimpse of him; but ‘twas just enough to show me that he’s not here for long.’

‘Why mid that be?’

‘He’ll never stand the vagaries of the female figure holden the reins — not he.’

‘She d’ pay en well,’ said a grinder; ‘and money’s money.’

‘Ah — ’tis: very much so,’ the clerk replied.

‘Yes, yes, naighbour Crickett,’ said Springrove, ‘but she’ll vlee in a passion — all the fat will be in the fire — and there’s an end o’t... Yes, she is a one,’ continued the farmer, resting, raising his eyes, and reading the features of a distant apple.

‘She is,’ said Gad, resting too (it is wonderful how prompt a journeyman is in following his master’s initiative to rest) and reflectively regarding the ground in front of him.

‘True: a one is she,’ the clerk chimed in, shaking his head ominously.

‘She has such a temper,’ said the farmer, ‘and is so wilful too. You may as well try to stop a footpath as stop her when she has taken anything into her head. I’d as soon grind little green crabs all day as live wi’ her.’

‘Tis a temper she hev, ‘tis,’ the clerk replied, ‘though I be a servant of the Church that say it. But she isn’t goen to flee in a passion this time.’

The audience waited for the continuation of the speech, as if they knew from experience the exact distance off it lay in the future.

The clerk swallowed nothing as if it were a great deal, and then went on, ‘There’s some’at between ‘em: mark my words, naighbours — there’s some’at between ‘em.’

‘D’ye mean it?’

‘I d’ know it. He came last Saturday, didn’t he?’

‘A did, truly,’ said Gad Weedy, at the same time taking an apple from the hopper of the mill, eating a piece, and flinging back the remainder to be ground up for cider.

‘He went to church a-Sunday,’ said the clerk again.

‘A did.’

‘And she kept her eye upon en all the service, her face flickeren between red and white, but never stoppen at either.’

Mr. Springrove nodded, and went to the press.

‘Well,’ said the clerk, ‘you don’t call her the kind o’ woman to make mistakes in just trodden through the weekly service o’ God? Why, as a rule she’s as right as I be myself.’

Mr. Springrove nodded again, and gave a twist to the screw of the press, followed in the movement by Gad at the other side; the two grinders expressing by looks of the greatest concern that, if Miss Aldclyffe were as right at church as the clerk, she must be right indeed.

‘Yes, as right in the service o’ God as I be myself,’ repeated the clerk. ‘But last Sunday, when we were in the tenth commandment, says she, “Incline our hearts to keep this law,” says she, when ‘twas “Laws in our hearts, we beseech Thee,” all the church through. Her eye was upon him — she was quite lost — “Hearts to keep this law,” says she; she was no more than a mere shadder at that tenth time — a mere shadder. You mi’t ha’ mouthed across to her “Laws in our hearts we beseech Thee,” fifty times over — she’d never ha’ noticed ye. She’s in love wi’ the man, that’s what she is.’

‘Then she’s a bigger stunpoll than I took her for,’ said Mr. Springrove. ‘Why, she’s old enough to be his mother.’

‘The row’ll be between her and that young Curlywig, you’ll see. She won’t run the risk of that pretty face be-en near.’

‘Clerk Crickett, I d’ fancy you d’ know everything about everybody,’ said Gad.

‘Well so’s,’ said the clerk modestly. ‘I do know a little. It comes to me.’

‘And I d’ know where from.’

‘Ah.’

‘That wife o’ thine. She’s an entertainen woman, not to speak disrespectful.’

‘She is: and a winnen one. Look at the husbands she’ve had — God bless her!’

‘I wonder you could stand third in that list, Clerk Crickett,’ said Mr. Springrove.

‘Well, ‘t has been a power o’ marvel to myself oftentimes. Yes, matrimony do begin wi’ “Dearly beloved,” and ends wi’ “Amazement,” as the prayer-book says. But what could I do, naighbour Springrove? ‘Twas ordained to be. Well do I call to mind what your poor lady said to me when I had just married. “Ah, Mr. Crickett,” says she, “your wife will soon settle you as she did her other two: here’s a glass o’ rum, for I shan’t see your poor face this time next year.” I swallowed the rum, called again next year, and said, “Mrs. Springrove, you gave me a glass o’ rum last year because I was going to die — here I be alive still, you see.” “Well said, clerk! Here’s two glasses for you now, then,” says she. “Thank you, mem,” I said, and swallowed the rum. Well, dang my old sides, next year I thought I’d call again and get three. And call I did. But she wouldn’t give me a drop o’ the commonest. “No, clerk,” says she, “you be too tough for a woman’s pity.”... Ah, poor soul, ‘twas true enough! Here be I, that was expected to die, alive and hard as a nail, you see, and there’s she moulderen in her grave.’

‘I used to think ‘twas your wife’s fate not to have a liven husband when I zid ‘em die off so,’ said Gad.

‘Fate? Bless thy simplicity, so ‘twas her fate; but she struggled to have one, and would, and did. Fate’s nothen beside a woman’s schemen!’

‘I suppose, then, that Fate is a He, like us, and the Lord, and the rest o’ ‘em up above there,’ said Gad, lifting his eyes to the sky.

‘Hullo! Here’s the young woman comen that we were a-talken about by-now,’ said a grinder, suddenly interrupting. ‘She’s comen up here, as I be alive!’

The two grinders stood and regarded Cytherea as if she had been a ship tacking into a harbour, nearly stopping the mill in their new interest.

‘Stylish accoutrements about the head and shoulders, to my thinken,’ said the clerk. ‘Sheenen curls, and plenty o’ em.’

‘If there’s one kind of pride more excusable than another in a young woman, ‘tis being proud of her hair,’ said Mr. Springrove.

‘Dear man! — the pride there is only a small piece o’ the whole. I warrant now, though she can show such a figure, she ha’n’t a stick o’ furniture to call her own.’

‘Come, Clerk Crickett, let the maid be a maid while she is a maid,’ said Farmer Springrove chivalrously.

‘O,’ replied the servant of the Church; ‘I’ve nothen to say against it — O no:

“‘The chimney-sweeper’s daughter Sue

As I have heard declare, O,

Although she’s neither sock nor shoe

Will curl and deck her hair, O.”

Cytherea was rather disconcerted at finding that the gradual cessation of the chopping of the mill was on her account, and still more when she saw all the cider-makers’ eyes fixed upon her except Mr. Springrove’s, whose natural delicacy restrained him. She neared the plot of grass, but instead of advancing further, hesitated on its border.

Mr. Springrove perceived her embarrassment, which was relieved when she saw his old-established figure coming across to her, wiping his hands in his apron.

‘I know your errand, missie,’ he said, ‘and am glad to see you, and attend to it. I’ll step indoors.’

‘If you are busy I am in no hurry for a minute or two,’ said Cytherea.

‘Then if so be you really wouldn’t mind, we’ll wring down this last filling to let it drain all night?’

‘Not at all. I like to see you.’

‘We are only just grinding down the early pickthongs and griffins,’ continued the farmer, in a half-apologetic tone for detaining by his cider-making any well-dressed woman. ‘They rot as black as a chimney-crook if we keep ‘em till the regulars turn in.’ As he spoke he went back to the press, Cytherea keeping at his elbow. ‘I’m later than I should have been by rights,’ he continued, taking up a lever for propelling the screw, and beckoning to the men to come forward. ‘The truth is, my son Edward had promised to come to-day, and I made preparations; but instead of him comes a letter: “London, September the eighteenth, Dear Father,” says he, and went on to tell me he couldn’t. It threw me out a bit.’

‘Of course,’ said Cytherea.

‘He’s got a place ‘a b’lieve?’ said the clerk, drawing near.

‘No, poor mortal fellow, no. He tried for this one here, you know, but couldn’t manage to get it. I don’t know the rights o’ the matter, but willy-nilly they wouldn’t have him for steward. Now mates, form in line.’

Springrove, the clerk, the grinders, and Gad, all ranged themselves behind the lever of the screw, and walked round like soldiers wheeling.

‘The man that the old quean hev got is a man you can hardly get upon your tongue to gainsay, by the look o’ en,’ rejoined Clerk Crickett.

‘One o’ them people that can contrive to be thought no worse o’ for stealen a horse than another man for looken over hedge at en,’ said a grinder.

‘Well, he’s all there as steward, and is quite the gentleman — no doubt about that.’

‘So would my Ted ha’ been, for the matter o’ that,’ the farmer said.

‘That’s true: ‘a would, sir.’

‘I said, I’ll give Ted a good education if it do cost me my eyes, and I would have done it.’

‘Ay, that you would so,’ said the chorus of assistants solemnly.

‘But he took to books and drawing naturally, and cost very little; and as a wind-up the womenfolk hatched up a match between him and his cousin.’

‘When’s the wedden to be, Mr. Springrove?’

‘Uncertain — but soon, I suppose. Edward, you see, can do anything pretty nearly, and yet can’t get a straightforward living. I wish sometimes I had kept him here, and let professions go. But he was such a one for the pencil.’

He dropped the lever in the hedge, and turned to his visitor.

‘Now then, missie, if you’ll come indoors, please.’

Gad Weedy looked with a placid criticism at Cytherea as she withdrew with the farmer.

‘I could tell by the tongue o’ her that she didn’t take her degrees in our county,’ he said in an undertone.

‘The railways have left you lonely here,’ she observed, when they were indoors.

Save the withered old flies, which were quite tame from the solitude, not a being was in the house. Nobody seemed to have entered it since the last passenger had been called out to mount the last stage-coach that had run by.

‘Yes, the Inn and I seem almost a pair of fossils,’ the farmer replied, looking at the room and then at himself.

‘O, Mr. Springrove,’ said Cytherea, suddenly recollecting herself; ‘I am much obliged to you for recommending me to Miss Aldclyffe.’ She began to warm towards the old man; there was in him a gentleness of disposition which reminded her of her own father.

‘Recommending? Not at all, miss. Ted — that’s my son — Ted said a fellow-draughtsman of his had a sister who wanted to be doing something in the world, and I mentioned it to the housekeeper, that’s all. Ay, I miss my son very much.’

She kept her back to the window that he might not see her rising colour.

‘Yes,’ he continued, ‘sometimes I can’t help feeling uneasy about him. You know, he seems not made for a town life exactly: he gets very queer over it sometimes, I think. Perhaps he’ll be better when he’s married to Adelaide.’

A half-impatient feeling arose in her, like that which possesses a sick person when he hears a recently-struck hour struck again by a slow clock. She had lived further on.

‘Everything depends upon whether he loves her,’ she said tremulously.

‘He used to — he doesn’t show it so much now; but that’s because he’s older. You see, it was several years ago they first walked together as young man and young woman. She’s altered too from what she was when he first courted her.’

‘How, sir?’

‘O, she’s more sensible by half. When he used to write to her she’d creep up the lane and look back over her shoulder, and slide out the letter, and read a word and stand in thought looking at the hills and seeing none. Then the cuckoo would cry — away the letter would slip, and she’d start wi’ fright at the mere bird, and have a red skin before the quickest man among ye could say, “Blood rush up.”’

He came forward with the money and dropped it into her hand. His thoughts were still with Edward, and he absently took her little fingers in his as he said, earnestly and ingenuously —

“Tis so seldom I get a gentlewoman to speak to that I can’t help speaking to you, Miss Graye, on my fears for Edward; I sometimes am afraid that he’ll never get on — that he’ll die poor and despised under the worst mental conditions, a keen sense of having been passed in the race by men whose brains are nothing to his own, all through his seeing too far into things — being discontented with make-shifts — thinking o’ perfection in things, and then sickened that there’s no such thing as perfection. I shan’t be sorry to see him marry, since it may settle him down and do him good... Ay, we’ll hope for the best.’

He let go her hand and accompanied her to the door saying, ‘If you should care to walk this way and talk to an old man once now and then, it will be a great delight to him, Miss Graye. Good-evening to ye... Ah look! a thunderstorm is brewing — be quick home. Or shall I step up with you?’

‘No, thank you, Mr. Springrove. Good evening,’ she said in a low voice, and hurried away. One thought still possessed her; Edward had trifled with her love.

4. FIVE TO SIX P.M.

She followed the road into a bower of trees, overhanging it so densely that the pass appeared like a rabbit’s burrow, and presently reached a side entrance to the park. The clouds rose more rapidly than the farmer had anticipated: the sheep moved in a trail, and complained incoherently. Livid grey shades, like those of the modern French painters, made a mystery of the remote and dark parts of the vista, and seemed to insist upon a suspension of breath. Before she was half-way across the park the thunder rumbled distinctly.

The direction in which she had to go would take her close by the old manor-house. The air was perfectly still, and between each low rumble of the thunder behind she

could hear the roar of the waterfall before her, and the creak of the engine among the bushes hard by it. Hurrying on, with a growing dread of the gloom and of the approaching storm, she drew near the Old House, now rising before her against the dark foliage and sky in tones of strange whiteness.

On the flight of steps, which descended from a terrace in front to the level of the park, stood a man. He appeared, partly from the relief the position gave to his figure, and partly from fact, to be of towering height. He was dark in outline, and was looking at the sky, with his hands behind him.

It was necessary for Cytherea to pass directly across the line of his front. She felt so reluctant to do this, that she was about to turn under the trees out of the path and enter it again at a point beyond the Old House; but he had seen her, and she came on mechanically, unconsciously averting her face a little, and dropping her glance to the ground.

Her eyes unswervingly lingered along the path until they fell upon another path branching in a right line from the path she was pursuing. It came from the steps of the Old House. 'I am exactly opposite him now,' she thought, 'and his eyes are going through me.'

A clear masculine voice said, at the same instant —
'Are you afraid?'

She, interpreting his question by her feelings at the moment, assumed himself to be the object of fear, if any. 'I don't think I am,' she stammered.

He seemed to know that she thought in that sense.

'Of the thunder, I mean,' he said; 'not of myself.'

She must turn to him now. 'I think it is going to rain,' she remarked for the sake of saying something.

He could not conceal his surprise and admiration of her face and bearing. He said courteously, 'It may possibly not rain before you reach the House, if you are going there?'

'Yes, I am,'

'May I walk up with you? It is lonely under the trees.'

'No.' Fearing his courtesy arose from a belief that he was addressing a woman of higher station than was hers, she added, 'I am Miss Aldclyffe's companion. I don't mind the loneliness.'

'O, Miss Aldclyffe's companion. Then will you be kind enough to take a subscription to her? She sent to me this afternoon to ask me to become a subscriber to her Society, and I was out. Of course I'll subscribe if she wishes it. I take a great interest in the Society.'

'Miss Aldclyffe will be glad to hear that, I know.'

'Yes; let me see — what Society did she say it was? I am afraid I haven't enough money in my pocket, and yet it would be a satisfaction to her to have practical proof of my willingness. I'll get it, and be out in one minute.'

He entered the house and was at her side again within the time he had named. 'This is it,' he said pleasantly.

She held up her hand. The soft tips of his fingers brushed the palm of her glove as he placed the money within it. She wondered why his fingers should have touched her.

'I think after all,' he continued, 'that the rain is upon us, and will drench you before you reach the House. Yes: see there.'

He pointed to a round wet spot as large as a nasturtium leaf, which had suddenly appeared upon the white surface of the step.

'You had better come into the porch. It is not nearly night yet. The clouds make it seem later than it really is.'

Heavy drops of rain, followed immediately by a forked flash of lightning and sharp rattling thunder compelled her, willingly or no, to accept his invitation. She ascended the steps, stood beside him just within the porch, and for the first time obtained a series of short views of his person, as they waited there in silence.

He was an extremely handsome man, well-formed, and well-dressed, of an age which seemed to be two or three years less than thirty. The most striking point in his appearance was the wonderful, almost preternatural, clearness of his complexion. There was not a blemish or speck of any kind to mar the smoothness of its surface or the beauty of its hue. Next, his forehead was square and broad, his brows straight and firm, his eyes penetrating and clear. By collecting the round of expressions they gave forth, a person who theorized on such matters would have imbibed the notion that their owner was of a nature to kick against the pricks; the last man in the world to put up with a position because it seemed to be his destiny to do so; one who took upon himself to resist fate with the vindictive determination of a Theomachist. Eyes and forehead both would have expressed keenness of intellect too severely to be pleasing, had their force not been counteracted by the lines and tone of the lips. These were full and luscious to a surprising degree, possessing a woman-like softness of curve, and a ruby redness so intense, as to testify strongly to much susceptibility of heart where feminine beauty was concerned — a susceptibility that might require all the ballast of brain with which he had previously been credited to confine within reasonable channels.

His manner was rather elegant than good: his speech well-finished and unconstrained.

The pause in their discourse, which had been caused by the peal of thunder was unbroken by either for a minute or two, during which the ears of both seemed to be absently following the low roar of the waterfall as it became gradually rivalled by the increasing rush of rain upon the trees and herbage of the grove. After her short looks at him, Cytherea had turned her head towards the avenue for a while, and now, glancing back again for an instant, she discovered that his eyes were engaged in a steady, though delicate, regard of her face and form.

At this moment, by reason of the narrowness of the porch, their dresses touched, and remained in contact.

His clothes are something exterior to every man; but to a woman her dress is part of her body. Its motions are all present to her intelligence if not to her eyes; no man knows how his coat-tails swing. By the slightest hyperbole it may be said that her dress has sensation. Crease but the very Ultima Thule of fringe or flounce, and it hurts her as much as pinching her. Delicate antennae, or feelers, bristle on every outlying frill. Go to the uppermost: she is there; tread on the lowest: the fair creature is there almost before you.

Thus the touch of clothes, which was nothing to Manston, sent a thrill through Cytherea, seeing, moreover, that he was of the nature of a mysterious stranger. She looked out again at the storm, but still felt him. At last to escape the sensation she moved away, though by so doing it was necessary to advance a little into the rain.

‘Look, the rain is coming into the porch upon you,’ he said. ‘Step inside the door.’ Cytherea hesitated.

‘Perfectly safe, I assure you,’ he added, laughing, and holding the door open. ‘You shall see what a state of disorganization I am in — boxes on boxes, furniture, straw, crockery, in every form of transposition. An old woman is in the back quarters somewhere, beginning to put things to rights... You know the inside of the house, I dare say?’

‘I have never been in.’

‘O well, come along. Here, you see, they have made a door through, here, they have put a partition dividing the old hall into two, one part is now my parlour; there they have put a plaster ceiling, hiding the old chestnut-carved roof because it was too high and would have been chilly for me; you see, being the original hall, it was open right up to the top, and here the lord of the manor and his retainers used to meet and be merry by the light from the monstrous fire which shone out from that monstrous fire-place, now narrowed to a mere nothing for my grate, though you can see the old outline still. I almost wish I could have had it in its original state.’

‘With more romance and less comfort.’

‘Yes, exactly. Well, perhaps the wish is not deep-seated. You will see how the things are tumbled in anyhow, packing-cases and all. The only piece of ornamental furniture yet unpacked is this one.’

‘An organ?’

‘Yes, an organ. I made it myself, except the pipes. I opened the case this afternoon to commence soothing myself at once. It is not a very large one, but quite big enough for a private house. You play, I dare say?’

‘The piano. I am not at all used to an organ.’

‘You would soon acquire the touch for an organ, though it would spoil your touch for the piano. Not that that matters a great deal. A piano isn’t much as an instrument.’

‘It is the fashion to say so now. I think it is quite good enough.’

‘That isn’t altogether a right sentiment about things being good enough.’

‘No — no. What I mean is, that the men who despise pianos do it as a rule from their teeth, merely for fashion’s sake, because cleverer men have said it before them — not from the experience of their ears.’

Now Cytherea all at once broke into a blush at the consciousness of a great snub she had been guilty of in her eagerness to explain herself. He charitably expressed by a look that he did not in the least mind her blunder, if it were one; and this attitude forced him into a position of mental superiority which vexed her.

‘I play for my private amusement only,’ he said. ‘I have never learned scientifically. All I know is what I taught myself.’

The thunder, lightning, and rain had now increased to a terrific force. The clouds, from which darts, forks, zigzags, and balls of fire continually sprang, did not appear to be more than a hundred yards above their heads, and every now and then a flash and a peal made gaps in the steward’s descriptions. He went towards the organ, in the midst of a volley which seemed to shake the aged house from foundations to chimney.

‘You are not going to play now, are you?’ said Cytherea uneasily.

‘O yes. Why not now?’ he said. ‘You can’t go home, and therefore we may as well be amused, if you don’t mind sitting on this box. The few chairs I have unpacked are in the other room.’

Without waiting to see whether she sat down or not, he turned to the organ and began extemporizing a harmony which meandered through every variety of expression of which the instrument was capable. Presently he ceased and began searching for some music-book.

‘What a splendid flash!’ he said, as the lightning again shone in through the mulioned window, which, of a proportion to suit the whole extent of the original hall, was much too large for the present room. The thunder pealed again. Cytherea, in spite of herself, was frightened, not only at the weather, but at the general unearthly weirdness which seemed to surround her there.

‘I wish I — the lightning wasn’t so bright. Do you think it will last long?’ she said timidly.

‘It can’t last much longer,’ he murmured, without turning, running his fingers again over the keys. ‘But this is nothing,’ he continued, suddenly stopping and regarding her. ‘It seems brighter because of the deep shadow under those trees yonder. Don’t mind it; now look at me — look in my face — now.’

He had faced the window, looking fixedly at the sky with his dark strong eyes. She seemed compelled to do as she was bidden, and looked in the too-delicately beautiful face.

The flash came; but he did not turn or blink, keeping his eyes fixed as firmly as before. ‘There,’ he said, turning to her, ‘that’s the way to look at lightning.’

‘O, it might have blinded you!’ she exclaimed.

‘Nonsense — not lightning of this sort — I shouldn’t have stared at it if there had been danger. It is only sheet-lightning now. Now, will you have another piece? Something from an oratorio this time?’

‘No, thank you — I don’t want to hear it whilst it thunders so.’ But he had begun without heeding her answer, and she stood motionless again, marvelling at the wonderful indifference to all external circumstance which was now evinced by his complete absorption in the music before him.

‘Why do you play such saddening chords?’ she said, when he next paused.

‘H’m — because I like them, I suppose,’ said he lightly. ‘Don’t you like sad impressions sometimes?’

‘Yes, sometimes, perhaps.’

‘When you are full of trouble.’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, why shouldn’t I when I am full of trouble?’

‘Are you troubled?’

‘I am troubled.’ He said this thoughtfully and abruptly — so abruptly that she did not push the dialogue further.

He now played more powerfully. Cytherea had never heard music in the completeness of full orchestral power, and the tones of the organ, which reverberated with considerable effect in the comparatively small space of the room, heightened by the elemental strife of light and sound outside, moved her to a degree out of proportion to the actual power of the mere notes, practised as was the hand that produced them. The varying strains — now loud, now soft; simple, complicated, weird, touching, grand, boisterous, subdued; each phase distinct, yet modulating into the next with a graceful and easy flow — shook and bent her to themselves, as a gushing brook shakes and bends a shadow cast across its surface. The power of the music did not show itself so much by attracting her attention to the subject of the piece, as by taking up and developing as its libretto the poem of her own life and soul, shifting her deeds and intentions from the hands of her judgment and holding them in its own.

She was swayed into emotional opinions concerning the strange man before her; new impulses of thought came with new harmonies, and entered into her with a gnawing thrill. A dreadful flash of lightning then, and the thunder close upon it. She found herself involuntarily shrinking up beside him, and looking with parted lips at his face.

He turned his eyes and saw her emotion, which greatly increased the ideal element in her expressive face. She was in the state in which woman’s instinct to conceal has lost its power over her impulse to tell; and he saw it. Bending his handsome face over her till his lips almost touched her ear, he murmured, without breaking the harmonies

‘Do you very much like this piece?’

‘Very much indeed,’ she said.

‘I could see you were affected by it. I will copy it for you.’

‘Thank you much.’

‘I will bring it to the House to you to-morrow. Who shall I ask for?’

‘O, not for me. Don’t bring it,’ she said hastily. ‘I shouldn’t like you to.’

‘Let me see — to-morrow evening at seven or a few minutes past I shall be passing the waterfall on my way home. I could conveniently give it you there, and I should like you to have it.’

He modulated into the Pastoral Symphony, still looking in her eyes.

‘Very well,’ she said, to get rid of the look.

The storm had by this time considerably decreased in violence, and in seven or ten minutes the sky partially cleared, the clouds around the western horizon becoming lighted up with the rays of the sinking sun.

Cytherea drew a long breath of relief, and prepared to go away. She was full of a distressing sense that her detention in the old manor-house, and the acquaintanceship it had set on foot, was not a thing she wished. It was such a foolish thing to have been excited and dragged into frankness by the wiles of a stranger.

‘Allow me to come with you,’ he said, accompanying her to the door, and again showing by his behaviour how much he was impressed with her. His influence over her had vanished with the musical chords, and she turned her back upon him. ‘May I come?’ he repeated.

‘No, no. The distance is not a quarter of a mile — it is really not necessary, thank you,’ she said quietly. And wishing him good-evening, without meeting his eyes, she went down the steps, leaving him standing at the door.

‘O, how is it that man has so fascinated me?’ was all she could think. Her own self, as she had sat spell-bound before him, was all she could see. Her gait was constrained, from the knowledge that his eyes were upon her until she had passed the hollow by the waterfall, and by ascending the rise had become hidden from his view by the boughs of the overhanging trees.

5. SIX TO SEVEN P.M.

The wet shining road threw the western glare into her eyes with an invidious lustre which rendered the restlessness of her mood more wearying. Her thoughts flew from idea to idea without asking for the slightest link of connection between one and another. One moment she was full of the wild music and stirring scene with Manston — the next, Edward’s image rose before her like a shadowy ghost. Then Manston’s black eyes seemed piercing her again, and the reckless voluptuous mouth appeared bending to the curves of his special words. What could be those troubles to which he had alluded? Perhaps Miss Aldclyffe was at the bottom of them. Sad at heart she paced on: her life was bewildering her.

On coming into Miss Aldclyffe’s presence Cytherea told her of the incident, not without a fear that she would burst into one of her ungovernable fits of temper at learning Cytherea’s slight departure from the programme. But, strangely to Cytherea, Miss Aldclyffe looked delighted. The usual cross-examination followed.

‘And so you were with him all that time?’ said the lady, with assumed severity.

‘Yes, I was.’

‘I did not tell you to call at the Old House twice.’

‘I didn’t call, as I have said. He made me come into the porch.’

‘What remarks did he make, do you say?’

‘That the lightning was not so bad as I thought.’

‘A very important remark, that. Did he — ’ she turned her glance full upon the girl, and eyeing her searchingly, said —

‘Did he say anything about me?’

‘Nothing,’ said Cytherea, returning her gaze calmly, ‘except that I was to give you the subscription.’

‘You are quite sure?’

‘Quite.’

‘I believe you. Did he say anything striking or strange about himself?’

‘Only one thing — that he was troubled,’

‘Troubled!’

After saying the word, Miss Aldclyffe relapsed into silence. Such behaviour as this had ended, on most previous occasions, by her making a confession, and Cytherea expected one now. But for once she was mistaken, nothing more was said.

When she had returned to her room she sat down and penned a farewell letter to Edward Springrove, as little able as any other excitable and brimming young woman of nineteen to feel that the wisest and only dignified course at that juncture was to do nothing at all. She told him that, to her painful surprise, she had learnt that his engagement to another woman was a matter of notoriety. She insisted that all honour bade him marry his early love — a woman far better than her unworthy self, who only deserved to be forgotten, and begged him to remember that he was not to see her face again. She upbraided him for levity and cruelty in meeting her so frequently at Budmouth, and above all in stealing the kiss from her lips on the last evening of the water excursions. ‘I never, never can forget it!’ she said, and then felt a sensation of having done her duty, ostensibly persuading herself that her reproaches and commands were of such a force that no man to whom they were uttered could ever approach her more.

Yet it was all unconsciously said in words which betrayed a lingering tenderness of love at every unguarded turn. Like Beatrice accusing Dante from the chariot, try as she might to play the superior being who contemned such mere eye-sensuousness, she betrayed at every point a pretty woman’s jealousy of a rival, and covertly gave her old lover hints for excusing himself at each fresh indictment.

This done, Cytherea, still in a practical mood, upbraided herself with weakness in allowing a stranger like Mr. Manston to influence her as he had done that evening. What right on earth had he to suggest so suddenly that she might meet him at the waterfall to receive his music? She would have given much to be able to annihilate the ascendancy he had obtained over her during that extraordinary interval of melodious sound. Not being able to endure the notion of his living a minute longer in the belief he was then holding, she took her pen and wrote to him also: —

‘KNAPWATER HOUSE

September 20th.

‘I find I cannot meet you at seven o’clock by the waterfall as I promised. The emotion I felt made me forgetful of realities.

‘C. GRAYE.’

A great statesman thinks several times, and acts; a young lady acts, and thinks several times. When, a few minutes later, she saw the postman carry off the bag containing one of the letters, and a messenger with the other, she, for the first time, asked herself the question whether she had acted very wisely in writing to either of the two men who had so influenced her.

IX. THE EVENTS OF TEN WEEKS

1. FROM SEPTEMBER THE TWENTY-FIRST TO THE MIDDLE OF NOVEMBER

The foremost figure within Cytherea’s horizon, exclusive of the inmates of Knapwater House, was now the steward, Mr. Manston. It was impossible that they should live within a quarter of a mile of each other, be engaged in the same service, and attend the same church, without meeting at some spot or another, twice or thrice a week. On Sundays, in her pew, when by chance she turned her head, Cytherea found his eyes waiting desirously for a glimpse of hers, and, at first more strangely, the eyes of Miss Aldclyffe furtively resting on him. On coming out of church he frequently walked beside Cytherea till she reached the gate at which residents in the House turned into the shrubbery. By degrees a conjecture grew to a certainty. She knew that he loved her.

But a strange fact was connected with the development of his love. He was palpably making the strongest efforts to subdue, or at least to hide, the weakness, and as it sometimes seemed, rather from his own conscience than from surrounding eyes. Hence she found that not one of his encounters with her was anything more than the result of pure accident. He made no advances whatever: without avoiding her, he never sought her: the words he had whispered at their first interview now proved themselves to be quite as much the result of unguarded impulse as was her answer. Something held him back, bound his impulse down, but she saw that it was neither pride of his person, nor fear that she would refuse him — a course she unhesitatingly resolved to take should he think fit to declare himself. She was interested in him and his marvellous beauty, as she might have been in some fascinating panther or leopard — for some undefinable reason she shrank from him, even whilst she admired. The keynote of her nature, a warm ‘precipitance of soul,’ as Coleridge happily writes it, which Manston had so directly pounced upon at their very first interview, gave her now a tremulous sense of being in some way in his power.

The state of mind was, on the whole, a dangerous one for a young and inexperienced woman; and perhaps the circumstance which, more than any other, led her to cherish Edward’s image now, was that he had taken no notice of the receipt of her letter,

stating that she discarded him. It was plain then, she said, that he did not care deeply for her, and she thereupon could not quite leave off caring deeply for him: —

‘*Ingenium mulierum,
Nolunt ubi velis, ubi nolis cupiunt ultro.*’

The month of October passed, and November began its course. The inhabitants of the village of Carriford grew weary of supposing that Miss Aldclyffe was going to marry her steward. New whispers arose and became very distinct (though they did not reach Miss Aldclyffe’s ears) to the effect that the steward was deeply in love with Cytherea Graye. Indeed, the fact became so obvious that there was nothing left to say about it except that their marriage would be an excellent one for both; — for her in point of comfort — and for him in point of love.

As circles in a pond grow wider and wider, the next fact, which at first had been patent only to Cytherea herself, in due time spread to her neighbours, and they, too, wondered that he made no overt advances. By the middle of November, a theory made up of a combination of the other two was received with general favour: its substance being that a guilty intrigue had been commenced between Manston and Miss Aldclyffe, some years before, when he was a very young man, and she still in the enjoyment of some womanly beauty, but now that her seniority began to grow emphatic she was becoming distasteful to him. His fear of the effect of the lady’s jealousy would, they said, thus lead him to conceal from her his new attachment to Cytherea. Almost the only woman who did not believe this was Cytherea herself, on unmistakable grounds, which were hidden from all besides. It was not only in public, but even more markedly in secluded places, on occasions when gallantry would have been safe from all discovery, that this guarded course of action was pursued, all the strength of a consuming passion burning in his eyes the while.

2. NOVEMBER THE EIGHTEENTH

It was on a Friday in this month of November that Owen Graye paid a visit to his sister.

His zealous integrity still retained for him the situation at Budmouth, and in order that there should be as little interruption as possible to his duties there, he had decided not to come to Knapwater till late in the afternoon, and to return to Budmouth by the first train the next morning, Miss Aldclyffe having made a point of frequently offering him lodging for an unlimited period, to the great pleasure of Cytherea.

He reached the house about four o’clock, and ringing the bell, asked of the page who answered it for Miss Graye.

When Graye spoke the name of his sister, Manston, who was just coming out from an interview with Miss Aldclyffe, passed him in the vestibule and heard the question. The steward’s face grew hot, and he secretly clenched his hands. He half crossed the court, then turned his head and saw that the lad still stood at the door, though Owen had been shown into the house. Manston went back to him.

‘Who was that man?’ he said.

‘I don’t know, sir.’

‘Has he ever been here before?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘How many times?’

‘Three.’

‘You are sure you don’t know him?’

‘I think he is Miss Graye’s brother, sir.’

‘Then, why the devil didn’t you say so before!’ Manston exclaimed, and again went on his way.

‘Of course, that was not the man of my dreams — of course, it couldn’t be!’ he said to himself. ‘That I should be such a fool — such an utter fool. Good God! to allow a girl to influence me like this, day after day, till I am jealous of her very brother. A lady’s dependent, a waif, a helpless thing entirely at the mercy of the world; yes, curse it; that is just why it is; that fact of her being so helpless against the blows of circumstances which renders her so deliciously sweet!’

He paused opposite his house. Should he get his horse saddled? No.

He went down the drive and out of the park, having started to proceed to an outlying spot on the estate concerning some draining, and to call at the potter’s yard to make an arrangement for the supply of pipes. But a remark which Miss Aldclyffe had dropped in relation to Cytherea was what still occupied his mind, and had been the immediate cause of his excitement at the sight of her brother. Miss Aldclyffe had meaningly remarked during their intercourse, that Cytherea was wildly in love with Edward Springrove, in spite of his engagement to his cousin Adelaide.

‘How I am harassed!’ he said aloud, after deep thought for half-an-hour, while still continuing his walk with the greatest vehemence. ‘How I am harassed by these emotions of mine!’ He calmed himself by an effort. ‘Well, duty after all it shall be, as nearly as I can effect it. “Honesty is the best policy;” with which vigorously uttered resolve he once more attempted to turn his attention to the prosy object of his journey.

The evening had closed in to a dark and dreary night when the steward came from the potter’s door to proceed homewards again. The gloom did not tend to raise his spirits, and in the total lack of objects to attract his eye, he soon fell to introspection as before. It was along the margin of turnip fields that his path lay, and the large leaves of the crop struck flatly against his feet at every step, pouring upon them the rolling drops of moisture gathered upon their broad surfaces; but the annoyance was unheeded. Next reaching a fir plantation, he mounted the stile and followed the path into the midst of the darkness produced by the overhanging trees.

After walking under the dense shade of the inky boughs for a few minutes, he fancied he had mistaken the path, which as yet was scarcely familiar to him. This was proved directly afterwards by his coming at right angles upon some obstruction, which careful feeling with outstretched hands soon told him to be a rail fence. However, as the wood was not large, he experienced no alarm about finding the path again, and with some sense of pleasure halted awhile against the rails, to listen to the intensely melancholy yet musical wail of the fir-tops, and as the wind passed on, the prompt moan of an

adjacent plantation in reply. He could just dimly discern the airy summits of the two or three trees nearest him waving restlessly backwards and forwards, and stretching out their boughs like hairy arms into the dull sky. The scene, from its striking and emphatic loneliness, began to grow congenial to his mood; all of human kind seemed at the antipodes.

A sudden rattle on his right hand caused him to start from his reverie, and turn in that direction. There, before him, he saw rise up from among the trees a fountain of sparks and smoke, then a red glare of light coming forward towards him; then a flashing panorama of illuminated oblong pictures; then the old darkness, more impressive than ever.

The surprise, which had owed its origin to his imperfect acquaintance with the topographical features of that end of the estate, had been but momentary; the disturbance, a well-known one to dwellers by a railway, being caused by the 6.50 down-train passing along a shallow cutting in the midst of the wood immediately below where he stood, the driver having the fire-door of the engine open at the minute of going by. The train had, when passing him, already considerably slackened speed, and now a whistle was heard, announcing that Carriford Road Station was not far in its van.

But contrary to the natural order of things, the discovery that it was only a commonplace train had not caused Manston to stir from his position of facing the railway.

If the 6.50 down-train had been a flash of forked lightning transfixing him to the earth, he could scarcely have remained in a more trance-like state. He still leant against the railings, his right hand still continued pressing on his walking-stick, his weight on one foot, his other heel raised, his eyes wide open towards the blackness of the cutting. The only movement in him was a slight dropping of the lower jaw, separating his previously closed lips a little way, as when a strange conviction rushes home suddenly upon a man. A new surprise, not nearly so trivial as the first, had taken possession of him.

It was on this account. At one of the illuminated windows of a second-class carriage in the series gone by, he had seen a pale face, reclining upon one hand, the light from the lamp falling full upon it. The face was a woman's.

At last Manston moved; gave a whispering kind of whistle, adjusted his hat, and walked on again, cross-questioning himself in every direction as to how a piece of knowledge he had carefully concealed had found its way to another person's intelligence. 'How can my address have become known?' he said at length, audibly. 'Well, it is a blessing I have been circumspect and honourable, in relation to that — yes, I will say it, for once, even if the words choke me, that darling of mine, Cytherea, never to be my own, never. I suppose all will come out now. All!' The great sadness of his utterance proved that no mean force had been exercised upon himself to sustain the circumspection he had just claimed.

He wheeled to the left, pursued the ditch beside the railway fence, and presently emerged from the wood, stepping into a road which crossed the railway by a bridge.

As he neared home, the anxiety lately written in his face, merged by degrees into a grimly humorous smile, which hung long upon his lips, and he quoted aloud a line from the book of Jeremiah —

‘A woman shall compass a man.’

3. NOVEMBER THE NINETEENTH. DAYBREAK

Before it was light the next morning, two little naked feet pattered along the passage in Knapwater House, from which Owen Graye’s bedroom opened, and a tap was given upon his door.

‘Owen, Owen, are you awake?’ said Cytherea in a whisper through the keyhole. ‘You must get up directly, or you’ll miss the train.’

When he descended to his sister’s little room, he found her there already waiting with a cup of cocoa and a grilled rasher on the table for him. A hasty meal was despatched in the intervals of putting on his overcoat and finding his hat, and they then went softly through the long deserted passages, the kitchen-maid who had prepared their breakfast walking before them with a lamp held high above her head, which cast long wheeling shadows down corridors intersecting the one they followed, their remoter ends being lost in darkness. The door was unbolted and they stepped out.

Owen had preferred walking to the station to accepting the pony-carriage which Miss Aldclyffe had placed at his disposal, having a morbid horror of giving trouble to people richer than himself, and especially to their men-servants, who looked down upon him as a hybrid monster in social position. Cytherea proposed to walk a little way with him.

‘I want to talk to you as long as I can,’ she said tenderly.

Brother and sister then emerged by the heavy door into the drive. The feeling and aspect of the hour were precisely similar to those under which the steward had left the house the evening previous, excepting that apparently unearthly reversal of natural sequence, which is caused by the world getting lighter instead of darker. ‘The tearful glimmer of the languid dawn’ was just sufficient to reveal to them the melancholy red leaves, lying thickly in the channels by the roadside, ever and anon loudly tapped on by heavy drops of water, which the boughs above had collected from the foggy air.

They passed the Old House, engaged in a deep conversation, and had proceeded about twenty yards by a cross route, in the direction of the turnpike road, when the form of a woman emerged from the porch of the building.

She was wrapped in a grey waterproof cloak, the hood of which was drawn over her head and closely round her face — so closely that her eyes were the sole features uncovered.

With this one exception of her appearance there, the most perfect stillness and silence pervaded the steward’s residence from basement to chimney. Not a shutter was open; not a twine of smoke came forth.

Underneath the ivy-covered gateway she stood still and listened for two, or possibly three minutes, till she became conscious of others in the park. Seeing the pair she stepped back, with the apparent intention of letting them pass out of sight, and evi-

dently wishing to avoid observation. But looking at her watch, and returning it rapidly to her pocket, as if surprised at the lateness of the hour, she hurried out again, and across the park by a still more oblique line than that traced by Owen and his sister.

These in the meantime had got into the road, and were walking along it as the woman came up on the other side of the boundary hedge, looking for a gate or stile, by which she, too, might get off the grass upon the hard ground.

Their conversation, of which every word was clear and distinct, in the still air of the dawn, to the distance of a quarter of a mile, reached her ears, and withdrew her attention from all other matters and sights whatsoever. Thus arrested she stood for an instant as precisely in the attitude of Imogen by the cave of Belarius, as if she had studied the position from the play. When they had advanced a few steps, she followed them in some doubt, still screened by the hedge.

‘Do you believe in such odd coincidences?’ said Cytherea.

‘How do you mean, believe in them? They occur sometimes.’

‘Yes, one will occur often enough — that is, two disconnected events will fall strangely together by chance, and people scarcely notice the fact beyond saying, “Oddly enough it happened that so and so were the same,” and so on. But when three such events coincide without any apparent reason for the coincidence, it seems as if there must be invisible means at work. You see, three things falling together in that manner are ten times as singular as two cases of coincidence which are distinct.’

‘Well, of course: what a mathematical head you have, Cytherea! But I don’t see so much to marvel at in our case. That the man who kept the public-house in which Miss Aldclyffe fainted, and who found out her name and position, lives in this neighbourhood, is accounted for by the fact that she got him the berth to stop his tongue. That you came here was simply owing to Springrove.’

‘Ah, but look at this. Miss Aldclyffe is the woman our father first loved, and I have come to Miss Aldclyffe’s; you can’t get over that.’

From these premises, she proceeded to argue like an elderly divine on the designs of Providence which were apparent in such conjunctures, and went into a variety of details connected with Miss Aldclyffe’s history.

‘Had I better tell Miss Aldclyffe that I know all this?’ she inquired at last.

‘What’s the use?’ he said. ‘Your possessing the knowledge does no harm; you are at any rate comfortable here, and a confession to Miss Aldclyffe might only irritate her. No, hold your tongue, Cytherea.’

‘I fancy I should have been tempted to tell her too,’ Cytherea went on, ‘had I not found out that there exists a very odd, almost imperceptible, and yet real connection of some kind between her and Mr. Manston, which is more than that of a mutual interest in the estate.’

‘She is in love with him!’ exclaimed Owen; ‘fancy that!’

‘Ah — that’s what everybody says who has been keen enough to notice anything. I said so at first. And yet now I cannot persuade myself that she is in love with him at all.’

‘Why can’t you?’

‘She doesn’t act as if she were. She isn’t — you will know I don’t say it from any vanity, Owen — she isn’t the least jealous of me.’

‘Perhaps she is in some way in his power.’

‘No — she is not. He was openly advertised for, and chosen from forty or fifty who answered the advertisement, without knowing whose it was. And since he has been here, she has certainly done nothing to compromise herself in any way. Besides, why should she have brought an enemy here at all?’

‘Then she must have fallen in love with him. You know as well as I do, Cyth, that with women there’s nothing between the two poles of emotion towards an interesting male acquaintance. ‘Tis either love or aversion.’

They walked for a few minutes in silence, when Cytherea’s eyes accidentally fell upon her brother’s feet.

‘Owen,’ she said, ‘do you know that there is something unusual in your manner of walking?’

‘What is it like?’ he asked.

‘I can’t quite say, except that you don’t walk so regularly as you used to.’

The woman behind the hedge, who had still continued to dog their footsteps, made an impatient movement at this change in their conversation, and looked at her watch again. Yet she seemed reluctant to give over listening to them.

‘Yes,’ Owen returned with assumed carelessness, ‘I do know it. I think the cause of it is that mysterious pain which comes just above my ankle sometimes. You remember the first time I had it? That day we went by steam-packet to Lulstead Cove, when it hindered me from coming back to you, and compelled me to sleep with the gateman we have been talking about.’

‘But is it anything serious, dear Owen?’ Cytherea exclaimed, with some alarm.

‘O, nothing at all. It is sure to go off again. I never find a sign of it when I sit in the office.’

Again their unperceived companion made a gesture of vexation, and looked at her watch as if time were precious. But the dialogue still flowed on upon this new subject, and showed no sign of returning to its old channel.

Gathering up her skirt decisively she renounced all further hope, and hurried along the ditch till she had dropped into a valley, and came to a gate which was beyond the view of those coming behind. This she softly opened, and came out upon the road, following it in the direction of the railway station.

Presently she heard Owen Graye’s footsteps in her rear, his quickened pace implying that he had parted from his sister. The woman thereupon increased her rapid walk to a run, and in a few minutes safely distanced her fellow-traveller.

The railway at Carriford Road consisted only of a single line of rails; and the short local down-train by which Owen was going to Budmouth was shunted on to a siding whilst the first up-train passed. Graye entered the waiting-room, and the door being

open he listlessly observed the movements of a woman wearing a long grey cloak, and closely hooded, who had asked for a ticket for London.

He followed her with his eyes on to the platform, saw her waiting there and afterwards stepping into the train: his recollection of her ceasing with the perception.

4. EIGHT TO TEN O'CLOCK A.M.

Mrs. Crickett, twice a widow, and now the parish clerk's wife, a fine-framed, scandal-loving woman, with a peculiar corner to her eye by which, without turning her head, she could see what people were doing almost behind her, lived in a cottage standing nearer to the old manor-house than any other in the village of Carriford, and she had on that account been temporarily engaged by the steward, as a respectable kind of charwoman and general servant, until a settled arrangement could be made with some person as permanent domestic.

Every morning, therefore, Mrs. Crickett, immediately she had lighted the fire in her own cottage, and prepared the breakfast for herself and husband, paced her way to the Old House to do the same for Mr. Manston. Then she went home to breakfast; and when the steward had eaten his, and had gone out on his rounds, she returned again to clear away, make his bed, and put the house in order for the day.

On the morning of Owen Graye's departure, she went through the operations of her first visit as usual — proceeded home to breakfast, and went back again, to perform those of the second.

Entering Manston's empty bedroom, with her hands on her hips, she indifferently cast her eyes upon the bed, previously to dismantling it.

Whilst she looked, she thought in an inattentive manner, 'What a remarkably quiet sleeper Mr. Manston must be!' The upper bed-clothes were flung back, certainly, but the bed was scarcely disarranged. 'Anybody would almost fancy,' she thought, 'that he had made it himself after rising.'

But these evanescent thoughts vanished as they had come, and Mrs. Crickett set to work; she dragged off the counterpane, blankets and sheets, and stooped to lift the pillows. Thus stooping, something arrested her attention; she looked closely — more closely — very closely. 'Well, to be sure!' was all she could say. The clerk's wife stood as if the air had suddenly set to amber, and held her fixed like a fly in it.

The object of her wonder was a trailing brown hair, very little less than a yard long, which proved it clearly to be a hair from some woman's head. She drew it off the pillow, and took it to the window; there holding it out she looked fixedly at it, and became utterly lost in meditation: her gaze, which had at first actively settled on the hair, involuntarily dropped past its object by degrees and was lost on the floor, as the inner vision obscured the outer one.

She at length moistened her lips, returned her eyes to the hair, wound it round her fingers, put it in some paper, and secreted the whole in her pocket. Mrs. Crickett's thoughts were with her work no more that morning.

She searched the house from roof-tree to cellar, for some other trace of feminine existence or appurtenance; but none was to be found.

She went out into the yard, coal-hole, stable, hay-loft, green-house, fowl-house, and piggery, and still there was no sign. Coming in again, she saw a bonnet, eagerly pounced upon it; and found it to be her own.

Hastily completing her arrangements in the other rooms, she entered the village again, and called at once on the postmistress, Elizabeth Leat, an intimate friend of hers, and a female who sported several unique diseases and afflictions.

Mrs. Crickett unfolded the paper, took out the hair, and waved it on high before the perplexed eyes of Elizabeth, which immediately mooned and wandered after it like a cat's.

'What is it?' said Mrs. Leat, contracting her eyelids, and stretching out towards the invisible object a narrow bony hand that would have been an unmitigated delight to the pencil of Carlo Crivelli.

'You shall hear,' said Mrs. Crickett, complacently gathering up the treasure into her own fat hand; and the secret was then solemnly imparted, together with the accident of its discovery.

A shaving-glass was taken down from a nail, laid on its back in the middle of a table by the window, and the hair spread carefully out upon it. The pair then bent over the table from opposite sides, their elbows on the edge, their hands supporting their heads, their foreheads nearly touching, and their eyes upon the hair.

'He ha' been mad a'ter my lady Cytherea,' said Mrs. Crickett, 'and 'tis my very belief the hair is —'

'No 'tidn'. Hers idn' so dark as that,' said Elizabeth.

'Elizabeth, you know that as the faithful wife of a servant of the Church, I should be glad to think as you do about the girl. Mind I don't wish to say anything against Miss Graye, but this I do say, that I believe her to be a nameless thing, and she's no right to stick a moral clock in her face, and deceive the country in such a way. If she wasn't of a bad stock at the outset she was bad in the planten, and if she wasn't bad in the planten, she was bad in the growen, and if not in the growen, she's made bad by what she's gone through since.'

'But I have another reason for knowing it idn' hers,' said Mrs. Leat.

'Ah! I know whose it is then — Miss Aldclyffe's, upon my song!'

'Tis the colour of hers, but I don't believe it to be hers either.'

'Don't you believe what they d' say about her and him?'

'I say nothen about that; but you don't know what I know about his letters.'

'What about 'em?'

'He d' post all his letters here except those for one person, and they he d' take to Budmouth. My son is in Budmouth Post Office, as you know, and as he d' sit at desk he can see over the blind of the window all the people who d' post letters. Mr. Manston d' unvariably go there wi' letters for that person; my boy d' know 'em by sight well enough now.'

'Is it a she?'

'Tis a she.'

‘What’s her name?’

‘The little stunpoll of a fellow couldn’t call to mind more than that ‘tis Miss Somebody, of London. However, that’s the woman who ha’ been here, depend upon’t — a wicked one — some poor street-wench escaped from Sodom, I warrant ye.’

‘Only to find herself in Gomorrah, seemingly.’

‘That may be.’

‘No, no, Mrs. Leat, this is clear to me. ‘Tis no miss who came here to see our steward last night — whenever she came or wherever she vanished. Do you think he would ha’ let a miss get here how she could, go away how she would, without breakfast or help of any kind?’

Elizabeth shook her head — Mrs. Crickett looked at her solemnly.

‘I say I know she had no help of any kind; I know it was so, for the grate was quite cold when I touched it this morning with these fingers, and he was still in bed. No, he wouldn’t take the trouble to write letters to a girl and then treat her so off-hand as that. There’s a tie between ‘em stronger than feelen. She’s his wife.’

‘He married! The Lord so ‘s, what shall we hear next? Do he look married now? His are not the abashed eyes and lips of a married man.’

‘Perhaps she’s a tame one — but she’s his wife still.’

‘No, no: he’s not a married man.’

‘Yes, yes, he is. I’ve had three, and I ought to know.’

‘Well, well,’ said Mrs. Leat, giving way. ‘Whatever may be the truth on’t I trust Providence will settle it all for the best, as He always do.’

‘Ay, ay, Elizabeth,’ rejoined Mrs. Crickett with a satirical sigh, as she turned on her foot to go home, ‘good people like you may say so, but I have always found Providence a different sort of feller.’

5. NOVEMBER THE TWENTIETH

It was Miss Aldclyffe’s custom, a custom originated by her father, and nourished by her own exclusiveness, to unlock the post-bag herself every morning, instead of allowing the duty to devolve on the butler, as was the case in most of the neighbouring county families. The bag was brought upstairs each morning to her dressing-room, where she took out the contents, mostly in the presence of her maid and Cytherea, who had the entree of the chamber at all hours, and attended there in the morning at a kind of reception on a small scale, which was held by Miss Aldclyffe of her namesake only.

Here she read her letters before the glass, whilst undergoing the operation of being brushed and dressed.

‘What woman can this be, I wonder?’ she said on the morning succeeding that of the last section. “‘London, N.!’” It is the first time in my life I ever had a letter from that outlandish place, the North side of London.’

Cytherea had just come into her presence to learn if there was anything for herself; and on being thus addressed, walked up to Miss Aldclyffe’s corner of the room to look at the curiosity which had raised such an exclamation. But the lady, having opened

the envelope and read a few lines, put it quickly in her pocket, before Cytherea could reach her side.

‘O, ‘tis nothing,’ she said. She proceeded to make general remarks in a noticeably forced tone of sang-froid, from which she soon lapsed into silence. Not another word was said about the letter: she seemed very anxious to get her dressing done, and the room cleared. Thereupon Cytherea went away to the other window, and a few minutes later left the room to follow her own pursuits.

It was late when Miss Aldclyffe descended to the breakfast-table and then she seemed there to no purpose; tea, coffee, eggs, cutlets, and all their accessories, were left absolutely untasted. The next that was seen of her was when walking up and down the south terrace, and round the flower-beds; her face was pale, and her tread was fitful, and she crumpled a letter in her hand.

Dinner-time came round as usual; she did not speak ten words, or indeed seem conscious of the meal; for all that Miss Aldclyffe did in the way of eating, dinner might have been taken out as intact as it was taken in.

In her own private apartment Miss Aldclyffe again pulled out the letter of the morning. One passage in it ran thus: —

‘Of course, being his wife, I could publish the fact, and compel him to acknowledge me at any moment, notwithstanding his threats, and reasonings that it will be better to wait. I have waited, and waited again, and the time for such acknowledgment seems no nearer than at first. To show you how patiently I have waited I can tell you that not till a fortnight ago, when by stress of circumstances I had been driven to new lodgings, have I ever assumed my married name, solely on account of its having been his request all along that I should not do it. This writing to you, madam, is my first disobedience, and I am justified in it. A woman who is driven to visit her husband like a thief in the night and then sent away like a street dog — left to get up, unbolt, unbar, and find her way out of the house as she best may — is justified in doing anything.

‘But should I demand of him a restitution of rights, there would be involved a publicity which I could not endure, and a noisy scandal flinging my name the length and breadth of the country.

‘What I still prefer to any such violent means is that you reason with him privately, and compel him to bring me home to your parish in a decent and careful manner, in the way that would be adopted by any respectable man, whose wife had been living away from him for some time, by reason, say, of peculiar family circumstances which had caused disunion, but not enmity, and who at length was enabled to reinstate her in his house.

‘You will, I know, oblige me in this, especially as knowledge of a peculiar transaction of your own, which took place some years ago, has lately come to me in a singular way. I will not at present trouble you by describing how. It is enough, that I alone, of all people living, know all the sides of the story, those from whom I collected it having each only a partial knowledge which confuses them and points to nothing. One person knows of your early engagement and its sudden termination; another, of the reason

of those strange meetings at inns and coffee-houses; another, of what was sufficient to cause all this, and so on. I know what fits one and all the circumstances like a key, and shows them to be the natural outcrop of a rational (though rather rash) line of conduct for a young lady. You will at once perceive how it was that some at least of these things were revealed to me.

‘This knowledge then, common to, and secretly treasured by us both, is the ground upon which I beg for your friendship and help, with a feeling that you will be too generous to refuse it to me.

‘I may add that, as yet, my husband knows nothing of this, neither need he if you remember my request.’

‘A threat — a flat stinging threat! as delicately wrapped up in words as the woman could do it; a threat from a miserable unknown creature to an Aldclyffe, and not the least proud member of the family either! A threat on his account — O, O! shall it be?’

Presently this humour of defiance vanished, and the members of her body became supple again, her proceedings proving that it was absolutely necessary to give way, Aldclyffe as she was. She wrote a short answer to Mrs. Manston, saying civilly that Mr. Manston’s possession of such a near relation was a fact quite new to herself, and that she would see what could be done in such an unfortunate affair.

6. NOVEMBER THE TWENTY-FIRST

Manston received a message the next day requesting his attendance at the House punctually at eight o’clock the ensuing evening. Miss Aldclyffe was brave and imperious, but with the purpose she had in view she could not look him in the face whilst daylight shone upon her.

The steward was shown into the library. On entering it, he was immediately struck with the unusual gloom which pervaded the apartment. The fire was dead and dull, one lamp, and that a comparatively small one, was burning at the extreme end, leaving the main proportion of the lofty and sombre room in an artificial twilight, scarcely powerful enough to render visible the titles of the folio and quarto volumes which were jammed into the lower tiers of the bookshelves.

After keeping him waiting for more than twenty minutes (Miss Aldclyffe knew that excellent recipe for taking the stiffness out of human flesh, and for extracting all pre-arrangement from human speech) she entered the room.

Manston sought her eye directly. The hue of her features was not discernible, but the calm glance she flung at him, from which all attempt at returning his scrutiny was absent, awoke him to the perception that probably his secret was by some means or other known to her; how it had become known he could not tell.

She drew forth the letter, unfolded it, and held it up to him, letting it hang by one corner from between her finger and thumb, so that the light from the lamp, though remote, fell directly upon its surface.

‘You know whose writing this is?’ she said.

He saw the strokes plainly, instantly resolving to burn his ships and hazard all on an advance.

‘My wife’s,’ he said calmly.

His quiet answer threw her off her balance. She had no more expected an answer than does a preacher when he exclaims from the pulpit, ‘Do you feel your sin?’ She had clearly expected a sudden alarm.

‘And why all this concealment?’ she said again, her voice rising, as she vainly endeavoured to control her feelings, whatever they were.

‘It doesn’t follow that, because a man is married, he must tell every stranger of it, madam,’ he answered, just as calmly as before.

‘Stranger! well, perhaps not; but, Mr. Manston, why did you choose to conceal it, I ask again? I have a perfect right to ask this question, as you will perceive, if you consider the terms of my advertisement.’

‘I will tell you. There were two simple reasons. The first was this practical one; you advertised for an unmarried man, if you remember?’

‘Of course I remember.’

‘Well, an incident suggested to me that I should try for the situation. I was married; but, knowing that in getting an office where there is a restriction of this kind, leaving one’s wife behind is always accepted as a fulfilment of the condition, I left her behind for awhile. The other reason is, that these terms of yours afforded me a plausible excuse for escaping (for a short time) the company of a woman I had been mistaken in marrying.’

‘Mistaken! what was she?’ the lady inquired.

‘A third-rate actress, whom I met with during my stay in Liverpool last summer, where I had gone to fulfil a short engagement with an architect.’

‘Where did she come from?’

‘She is an American by birth, and I grew to dislike her when we had been married a week.’

‘She was ugly, I imagine?’

‘She is not an ugly woman by any means.’

‘Up to the ordinary standard?’

‘Quite up to the ordinary standard — indeed, handsome. After a while we quarrelled and separated.’

‘You did not ill-use her, of course?’ said Miss Aldclyffe, with a little sarcasm.

‘I did not.’

‘But at any rate, you got thoroughly tired of her.’

Manston looked as if he began to think her questions out of place; however, he said quietly, ‘I did get tired of her. I never told her so, but we separated; I to come here, bringing her with me as far as London and leaving her there in perfectly comfortable quarters; and though your advertisement expressed a single man, I have always intended to tell you the whole truth; and this was when I was going to tell it, when your satisfaction with my careful management of your affairs should have proved the risk to be a safe one to run.’

She bowed.

‘Then I saw that you were good enough to be interested in my welfare to a greater extent than I could have anticipated or hoped, judging you by the frigidity of other employers, and this caused me to hesitate. I was vexed at the complication of affairs. So matters stood till three nights ago; I was then walking home from the pottery, and came up to the railway. The down-train came along close to me, and there, sitting at a carriage window, I saw my wife: she had found out my address, and had thereupon determined to follow me here. I had not been home many minutes before she came in, next morning early she left again — ’

‘Because you treated her so cavalierly?’

‘And as I suppose, wrote to you directly. That’s the whole story of her, madam.’ Whatever were Manston’s real feelings towards the lady who had received his explanation in these supercilious tones, they remained locked within him as within a casket of steel.

‘Did your friends know of your marriage, Mr. Manston?’ she continued.

‘Nobody at all; we kept it a secret for various reasons.’

‘It is true then that, as your wife tells me in this letter, she has not passed as Mrs. Manston till within these last few days?’

‘It is quite true; I was in receipt of a very small and uncertain income when we married; and so she continued playing at the theatre as before our marriage, and in her maiden name.’

‘Has she any friends?’

‘I have never heard that she has any in England. She came over here on some theatrical speculation, as one of a company who were going to do much, but who never did anything; and here she has remained.’

A pause ensued, which was terminated by Miss Aldclyffe.

‘I understand,’ she said. ‘Now, though I have no direct right to concern myself with your private affairs (beyond those which arise from your misleading me and getting the office you hold) — ’

‘As to that, madam,’ he interrupted, rather hotly, ‘as to coming here, I am vexed as much as you. Somebody, a member of the Institute of Architects — who, I could never tell — sent to my old address in London your advertisement cut from the paper; it was forwarded to me; I wanted to get away from Liverpool, and it seemed as if this was put in my way on purpose, by some old friend or other. I answered the advertisement certainly, but I was not particularly anxious to come here, nor am I anxious to stay.’

Miss Aldclyffe descended from haughty superiority to womanly persuasion with a haste which was almost ludicrous. Indeed, the Quos ego of the whole lecture had been less the genuine menace of the imperious ruler of Knapwater than an artificial utterance to hide a failing heart.

‘Now, now, Mr. Manston, you wrong me; don’t suppose I wish to be overbearing, or anything of the kind; and you will allow me to say this much, at any rate, that I have become interested in your wife, as well as in yourself.’

‘Certainly, madam,’ he said, slowly, like a man feeling his way in the dark. Manston was utterly at fault now. His previous experience of the effect of his form and features upon womankind en masse, had taught him to flatter himself that he could account by the same law of natural selection for the extraordinary interest Miss Aldclyffe had hitherto taken in him, as an unmarried man; an interest he did not at all object to, seeing that it kept him near Cytherea, and enabled him, a man of no wealth, to rule on the estate as if he were its lawful owner. Like Curius at his Sabine farm, he had counted it his glory not to possess gold himself, but to have power over her who did. But at this hint of the lady’s wish to take his wife under her wing also, he was perplexed: could she have any sinister motive in doing so? But he did not allow himself to be troubled with these doubts, which only concerned his wife’s happiness.

‘She tells me,’ continued Miss Aldclyffe, ‘how utterly alone in the world she stands, and that is an additional reason why I should sympathize with her. Instead, then, of requesting the favour of your retirement from the post, and dismissing your interests altogether, I will retain you as my steward still, on condition that you bring home your wife, and live with her respectably, in short, as if you loved her; you understand. I wish you to stay here if you grant that everything shall flow smoothly between yourself and her.’

The breast and shoulders of the steward rose, as if an expression of defiance was about to be poured forth; before it took form, he controlled himself and said, in his natural voice —

‘My part of the performance shall be carried out, madam.’

‘And her anxiety to obtain a standing in the world ensures that hers will,’ replied Miss Aldclyffe. ‘That will be satisfactory, then.’

After a few additional remarks, she gently signified that she wished to put an end to the interview. The steward took the hint and retired.

He felt vexed and mortified; yet in walking homeward he was convinced that telling the whole truth as he had done, with the single exception of his love for Cytherea (which he tried to hide even from himself), had never served him in better stead than it had done that night.

Manston went to his desk and thought of Cytherea’s beauty with the bitterest, wildest regret. After the lapse of a few minutes he calmed himself by a stoical effort, and wrote the subjoined letter to his wife: —

‘KNAPWATER,

November 21, 1864.

‘DEAR EUNICE, — I hope you reached London safely after your flighty visit to me.

‘As I promised, I have thought over our conversation that night, and your wish that your coming here should be no longer delayed. After all, it was perfectly natural that you should have spoken unkindly as you did, ignorant as you were of the circumstances which bound me.

‘So I have made arrangements to fetch you home at once. It is hardly worth while for you to attempt to bring with you any luggage you may have gathered about you (beyond mere clothing). Dispose of superfluous things at a broker’s; your bringing them would only make a talk in this parish, and lead people to believe we had long been keeping house separately.

‘Will next Monday suit you for coming? You have nothing to do that can occupy you for more than a day or two, as far as I can see, and the remainder of this week will afford ample time. I can be in London the night before, and we will come down together by the mid-day train — Your very affectionate husband,

‘AENEAS MANSTON.

‘Now, of course, I shall no longer write to you as Mrs. Rondley.’

The address on the envelope was —

MRS. MANSTON, 41 CHARLES SQUARE,
HOXTON,
LONDON, N.

He took the letter to the house, and it being too late for the country post, sent one of the stablemen with it to Casterbridge, instead of troubling to go to Budmouth with it himself as heretofore. He had no longer any necessity to keep his condition a secret.

7. FROM THE TWENTY-SECOND TO THE TWENTY-SEVENTH OF NOVEMBER

But the next morning Manston found that he had been forgetful of another matter, in naming the following Monday to his wife for the journey.

The fact was this. A letter had just come, reminding him that he had left the whole of the succeeding week open for an important business engagement with a neighbouring land-agent, at that gentleman’s residence thirteen miles off. The particular day he had suggested to his wife, had, in the interim, been appropriated by his correspondent. The meeting could not now be put off.

So he wrote again to his wife, stating that business, which could not be postponed, called him away from home on Monday, and would entirely prevent him coming all the way to fetch her on Sunday night as he had intended, but that he would meet her at the Carriford Road Station with a conveyance when she arrived there in the evening.

The next day came his wife’s answer to his first letter, in which she said that she would be ready to be fetched at the time named. Having already written his second letter, which was by that time in her hands, he made no further reply.

The week passed away. The steward had, in the meantime, let it become generally known in the village that he was a married man, and by a little judicious management, sound family reasons for his past secrecy upon the subject, which were floated as adjuncts to the story, were placidly received; they seemed so natural and justifiable to the unsophisticated minds of nine-tenths of his neighbours, that curiosity in the matter, beyond a strong curiosity to see the lady’s face, was well-nigh extinguished.

X. THE EVENTS OF A DAY AND NIGHT

1. NOVEMBER THE TWENTY-EIGHTH. UNTIL TEN P.M.

Monday came, the day named for Mrs. Manston's journey from London to her husband's house; a day of singular and great events, influencing the present and future of nearly all the personages whose actions in a complex drama form the subject of this record.

The proceedings of the steward demand the first notice. Whilst taking his breakfast on this particular morning, the clock pointing to eight, the horse-and-gig that was to take him to Chettlewood waiting ready at the door, Manston hurriedly cast his eyes down the column of Bradshaw which showed the details and duration of the selected train's journey.

The inspection was carelessly made, the leaf being kept open by the aid of one hand, whilst the other still held his cup of coffee; much more carelessly than would have been the case had the expected new-comer been Cytherea Graye, instead of his lawful wife.

He did not perceive, branching from the column down which his finger ran, a small twist, called a shunting-line, inserted at a particular place, to imply that at that point the train was divided into two. By this oversight he understood that the arrival of his wife at Carriford Road Station would not be till late in the evening: by the second half of the train, containing the third-class passengers, and passing two hours and three-quarters later than the previous one, by which the lady, as a second-class passenger, would really be brought.

He then considered that there would be plenty of time for him to return from his day's engagement to meet this train. He finished his breakfast, gave proper and precise directions to his servant on the preparations that were to be made for the lady's reception, jumped into his gig, and drove off to Lord Claydonfield's, at Chettlewood.

He went along by the front of Knapwater House. He could not help turning to look at what he knew to be the window of Cytherea's room. Whilst he looked, a hopeless expression of passionate love and sensuous anguish came upon his face and lingered there for a few seconds; then, as on previous occasions, it was resolutely repressed, and he trotted along the smooth white road, again endeavouring to banish all thought of the young girl whose beauty and grace had so enslaved him.

Thus it was that when, in the evening of the same day, Mrs. Manston reached Carriford Road Station, her husband was still at Chettlewood, ignorant of her arrival, and on looking up and down the platform, dreary with autumn gloom and wind, she could see no sign that any preparation whatever had been made for her reception and conduct home.

The train went on. She waited, fidgeted with the handle of her umbrella, walked about, strained her eyes into the gloom of the chilly night, listened for wheels, tapped with her foot, and showed all the usual signs of annoyance and irritation: she was the more irritated in that this seemed a second and culminating instance of her husband's neglect — the first having been shown in his not fetching her.

Reflecting awhile upon the course it would be best to take, in order to secure a passage to Knapwater, she decided to leave all her luggage, except a dressing-bag, in the cloak-room, and walk to her husband's house, as she had done on her first visit. She asked one of the porters if he could find a lad to go with her and carry her bag: he offered to do it himself.

The porter was a good-tempered, shallow-minded, ignorant man. Mrs. Manston, being apparently in very gloomy spirits, would probably have preferred walking beside him without saying a word: but her companion would not allow silence to continue between them for a longer period than two or three minutes together.

He had volunteered several remarks upon her arrival, chiefly to the effect that it was very unfortunate Mr. Manston had not come to the station for her, when she suddenly asked him concerning the inhabitants of the parish.

He told her categorically the names of the chief — first the chief possessors of property; then of brains; then of good looks. As first among the latter he mentioned Miss Cytherea Graye.

After getting him to describe her appearance as completely as lay in his power, she wormed out of him the statement that everybody had been saying — before Mrs. Manston's existence was heard of — how well the handsome Mr. Manston and the beautiful Miss Graye were suited for each other as man and wife, and that Miss Aldclyffe was the only one in the parish who took no interest in bringing about the match.

'He rather liked her you think?'

The porter began to think he had been too explicit, and hastened to correct the error.

'O no, he don't care a bit about her, ma'am,' he said solemnly.

'Not more than he does about me?'

'Not a bit.'

'Then that must be little indeed,' Mrs. Manston murmured. She stood still, as if reflecting upon the painful neglect her words had recalled to her mind; then, with a sudden impulse, turned round, and walked petulantly a few steps back again in the direction of the station.

The porter stood still and looked surprised.

'I'll go back again; yes, indeed, I'll go back again!' she said plaintively. Then she paused and looked anxiously up and down the deserted road.

'No, I mustn't go back now,' she continued, in a tone of resignation. Seeing that the porter was watching her, she turned about and came on as before, giving vent to a slight laugh.

It was a laugh full of character; the low forced laugh which seeks to hide the painful perception of a humiliating position under the mask of indifference.

Altogether her conduct had shown her to be what in fact she was, a weak, though a calculating woman, one clever to conceive, weak to execute: one whose best-laid schemes were for ever liable to be frustrated by the ineradicable blight of vacillation at the critical hour of action.

'O, if I had only known that all this was going to happen!' she murmured again, as they paced along upon the rustling leaves.

'What did you say, ma'am?' said the porter.

'O, nothing particular; we are getting near the old manor-house by this time, I imagine?'

'Very near now, ma'am.'

They soon reached Manston's residence, round which the wind blew mournfully and chill.

Passing under the detached gateway, they entered the porch. The porter stepped forward, knocked heavily and waited.

Nobody came.

Mrs. Manston then advanced to the door and gave a different series of rappings — less forcible, but more sustained.

There was not a movement of any kind inside, not a ray of light visible; nothing but the echo of her own knocks through the passages, and the dry scratching of the withered leaves blown about her feet upon the floor of the porch.

The steward, of course, was not at home. Mrs. Crickett, not expecting that anybody would arrive till the time of the later train, had set the place in order, laid the supper-table, and then locked the door, to go into the village and converse with her friends.

'Is there an inn in the village?' said Mrs. Manston, after the fourth and loudest rapping upon the iron-studded old door had resulted only in the fourth and loudest echo from the passages inside.

'Yes, ma'am.'

'Who keeps it?'

'Farmer Springrove.'

'I will go there to-night,' she said decisively. 'It is too cold, and altogether too bad, for a woman to wait in the open road on anybody's account, gentle or simple.'

They went down the park and through the gate, into the village of Carriford. By the time they reached the Three Tranters, it was verging upon ten o'clock. There, on the spot where two months earlier in the season the sunny and lively group of villagers making cider under the trees had greeted Cytherea's eyes, was nothing now intelligible but a vast cloak of darkness, from which came the low sough of the elms, and the occasional creak of the swinging sign.

They went to the door, Mrs. Manston shivering; but less from the cold, than from the dreariness of her emotions. Neglect is the coldest of winter winds.

It so happened that Edward Springrove was expected to arrive from London either on that evening or the next, and at the sound of voices his father came to the door fully expecting to see him. A picture of disappointment seldom witnessed in a man's face was visible in old Mr. Springrove's, when he saw that the comer was a stranger.

Mrs. Manston asked for a room, and one that had been prepared for Edward was immediately named as being ready for her, another being adaptable for Edward, should he come in.

Without taking any refreshment, or entering any room downstairs, or even lifting her veil, she walked straight along the passage and up to her apartment, the chambermaid preceding her.

‘If Mr. Manston comes to-night,’ she said, sitting on the bed as she had come in, and addressing the woman, ‘tell him I cannot see him.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

The woman left the room, and Mrs. Manston locked the door. Before the servant had gone down more than two or three stairs, Mrs. Manston unfastened the door again, and held it ajar.

‘Bring me some brandy,’ she said.

The chambermaid went down to the bar and brought up the spirit in a tumbler. When she came into the room, Mrs. Manston had not removed a single article of apparel, and was walking up and down, as if still quite undecided upon the course it was best to adopt.

Outside the door, when it was closed upon her, the maid paused to listen for an instant. She heard Mrs. Manston talking to herself.

‘This is welcome home!’ she said.

2. FROM TEN TO HALF-PAST ELEVEN P.M.

A strange concurrence of phenomena now confronts us.

During the autumn in which the past scenes were enacted, Mr. Springrove had ploughed, harrowed, and cleaned a narrow and shaded piece of ground, lying at the back of his house, which for many years had been looked upon as irreclaimable waste.

The couch-grass extracted from the soil had been left to wither in the sun; afterwards it was raked together, lighted in the customary way, and now lay smouldering in a large heap in the middle of the plot.

It had been kindled three days previous to Mrs. Manston’s arrival, and one or two villagers, of a more cautious and less sanguine temperament than Springrove, had suggested that the fire was almost too near the back of the house for its continuance to be unattended with risk; for though no danger could be apprehended whilst the air remained moderately still, a brisk breeze blowing towards the house might possibly carry a spark across.

‘Ay, that’s true enough,’ said Springrove. ‘I must look round before going to bed and see that everything’s safe; but to tell the truth I am anxious to get the rubbish burnt up before the rain comes to wash it into ground again. As to carrying the couch into the back field to burn, and bringing it back again, why, ‘tis more than the ashes would be worth.’

‘Well, that’s very true,’ said the neighbours, and passed on.

Two or three times during the first evening after the heap was lit, he went to the back door to take a survey. Before bolting and barring up for the night, he made a final and more careful examination. The slowly-smoking pile showed not the slightest signs of activity. Springrove’s perfectly sound conclusion was, that as long as the heap was not stirred, and the wind continued in the quarter it blew from then, the couch

would not flame, and that there could be no shadow of danger to anything, even a combustible substance, though it were no more than a yard off.

The next morning the burning couch was discovered in precisely the same state as when he had gone to bed the preceding night. The heap smoked in the same manner the whole of that day: at bed-time the farmer looked towards it, but less carefully than on the first night.

The morning and the whole of the third day still saw the heap in its old smouldering condition; indeed, the smoke was less, and there seemed a probability that it might have to be re-kindled on the morrow.

After admitting Mrs. Manston to his house in the evening, and hearing her retire, Mr. Springrove returned to the front door to listen for a sound of his son, and inquired concerning him of the railway-porter, who sat for a while in the kitchen. The porter had not noticed young Mr. Springrove get out of the train, at which intelligence the old man concluded that he would probably not see his son till the next day, as Edward had hitherto made a point of coming by the train which had brought Mrs. Manston.

Half-an-hour later the porter left the inn, Springrove at the same time going to the door to listen again an instant, then he walked round and in at the back of the house.

The farmer glanced at the heap casually and indifferently in passing; two nights of safety seemed to ensure the third; and he was about to bolt and bar as usual, when the idea struck him that there was just a possibility of his son's return by the latest train, unlikely as it was that he would be so delayed. The old man thereupon left the door unfastened, looked to his usual matters indoors, and went to bed, it being then half-past ten o'clock.

Farmers and horticulturists well know that it is in the nature of a heap of couch-grass, when kindled in calm weather, to smoulder for many days, and even weeks, until the whole mass is reduced to a powdery charcoal ash, displaying the while scarcely a sign of combustion beyond the volcano-like smoke from its summit; but the continuance of this quiet process is throughout its length at the mercy of one particular whim of Nature: that is, a sudden breeze, by which the heap is liable to be fanned into a flame so brisk as to consume the whole in an hour or two.

Had the farmer narrowly watched the pile when he went to close the door, he would have seen, besides the familiar twine of smoke from its summit, a quivering of the air around the mass, showing that a considerable heat had arisen inside.

As the railway-porter turned the corner of the row of houses adjoining the Three Tranters, a brisk new wind greeted his face, and spread past him into the village. He walked along the high-road till he came to a gate, about three hundred yards from the inn. Over the gate could be discerned the situation of the building he had just quitted. He carelessly turned his head in passing, and saw behind him a clear red glow indicating the position of the couch-heap: a glow without a flame, increasing and diminishing in brightness as the breeze quickened or fell, like the coal of a newly lighted cigar. If those cottages had been his, he thought, he should not care to have a fire so near them as that — and the wind rising. But the cottages not being his, he went on

his way to the station, where he was about to resume duty for the night. The road was now quite deserted: till four o'clock the next morning, when the carters would go by to the stables there was little probability of any human being passing the Three Tranters Inn.

By eleven, everybody in the house was asleep. It truly seemed as if the treacherous element knew there had arisen a grand opportunity for devastation.

At a quarter past eleven a slight stealthy crackle made itself heard amid the increasing moans of the night wind; the heap glowed brighter still, and burst into a flame; the flame sank, another breeze entered it, sustained it, and it grew to be first continuous and weak, then continuous and strong.

At twenty minutes past eleven a blast of wind carried an airy bit of ignited fern several yards forward, in a direction parallel to the houses and inn, and there deposited it on the ground.

Five minutes later another puff of wind carried a similar piece to a distance of five-and-twenty yards, where it also was dropped softly on the ground.

Still the wind did not blow in the direction of the houses, and even now to a casual observer they would have appeared safe. But Nature does few things directly. A minute later yet, an ignited fragment fell upon the straw covering of a long thatched heap or 'grave' of mangel-wurzel, lying in a direction at right angles to the house, and down toward the hedge. There the fragment faded to darkness.

A short time subsequent to this, after many intermediate deposits and seemingly baffled attempts, another fragment fell on the mangel-wurzel grave, and continued to glow; the glow was increased by the wind; the straw caught fire and burst into flame. It was inevitable that the flame should run along the ridge of the thatch towards a piggery at the end. Yet had the piggery been tiled, the time-honoured hostel would even now at this last moment have been safe; but it was constructed as piggeries are mostly constructed, of wood and thatch. The hurdles and straw roof of the frail erection became ignited in their turn, and abutting as the shed did on the back of the inn, flamed up to the eaves of the main roof in less than thirty seconds.

3. HALF-PAST ELEVEN TO TWELVE P.M.

A hazardous length of time elapsed before the inmates of the Three Tranters knew of their danger. When at length the discovery was made, the rush was a rush for bare life.

A man's voice calling, then screams, then loud stamping and shouts were heard.

Mr. Springrove ran out first. Two minutes later appeared the ostler and chambermaid, who were man and wife. The inn, as has been stated, was a quaint old building, and as inflammable as a bee-hive; it overhung the base at the level of the first floor, and again overhung at the eaves, which were finished with heavy oak barge-boards; every atom in its substance, every feature in its construction, favoured the fire.

The forked flames, lurid and smoky, became nearly lost to view, bursting forth again with a bound and loud crackle, increased tenfold in power and brightness. The crackling grew sharper. Long quivering shadows began to be flung from the stately

trees at the end of the house; the square outline of the church tower, on the other side of the way, which had hitherto been a dark mass against a sky comparatively light, now began to appear as a light object against a sky of darkness; and even the narrow surface of the flag-staff at the top could be seen in its dark surrounding, brought out from its obscurity by the rays from the dancing light.

Shouts and other noises increased in loudness and frequency. The lapse of ten minutes brought most of the inhabitants of that end of the village into the street, followed in a short time by the rector, Mr. Raunham.

Casting a hasty glance up and down, he beckoned to one or two of the men, and vanished again. In a short time wheels were heard, and Mr. Raunham and the men reappeared, with the garden engine, the only one in the village, except that at Knapwater House. After some little trouble the hose was connected with a tank in the old stable-yard, and the puny instrument began to play.

Several seemed paralyzed at first, and stood transfixed, their rigid faces looking like red-hot iron in the glaring light. In the confusion a woman cried, 'Ring the bells backwards!' and three or four of the old and superstitious entered the belfry and jangled them indescribably. Some were only half dressed, and, to add to the horror, among them was Clerk Crickett, running up and down with a face streaming with blood, ghastly and pitiful to see, his excitement being so great that he had not the slightest conception of how, when, or where he came by the wound.

The crowd was now busy at work, and tried to save a little of the furniture of the inn. The only room they could enter was the parlour, from which they managed to bring out the bureau, a few chairs, some old silver candlesticks, and half-a-dozen light articles; but these were all.

Fiery mats of thatch slid off the roof and fell into the road with a deadened thud, whilst white flakes of straw and wood-ash were flying in the wind like feathers. At the same time two of the cottages adjoining, upon which a little water had been brought to play from the rector's engine, were seen to be on fire. The attenuated spirt of water was as nothing upon the heated and dry surface of the thatched roof; the fire prevailed without a minute's hindrance, and dived through to the rafters.

Suddenly arose a cry, 'Where's Mr. Springrove?'

He had vanished from the spot by the churchyard wall, where he had been standing a few minutes earlier.

'I fancy he's gone inside,' said a voice.

'Madness and folly! what can he save?' said another. 'Good God, find him! Help here!'

A wild rush was made at the door, which had fallen to, and in defiance of the scorching flame that burst forth, three men forced themselves through it. Immediately inside the threshold they found the object of their search lying senseless on the floor of the passage.

To bring him out and lay him on a bank was the work of an instant; a basin of cold water was dashed in his face, and he began to recover consciousness, but very slowly.

He had been saved by a miracle. No sooner were his preservers out of the building than the window-frames lit up as if by magic with deep and waving fringes of flames. Simultaneously, the joints of the boards forming the front door started into view as glowing bars of fire: a star of red light penetrated the centre, gradually increasing in size till the flames rushed forth.

Then the staircase fell.

‘Everybody is out safe,’ said a voice.

‘Yes, thank God!’ said three or four others.

‘O, we forgot that a stranger came! I think she is safe.’

‘I hope she is,’ said the weak voice of some one coming up from behind. It was the chambermaid’s.

Springrove at that moment aroused himself; he staggered to his feet, and threw his hands up wildly.

‘Everybody, no! no! The lady who came by train, Mrs. Manston! I tried to fetch her out, but I fell.’

An exclamation of horror burst from the crowd; it was caused partly by this disclosure of Springrove, more by the added perception which followed his words.

An average interval of about three minutes had elapsed between one intensely fierce gust of wind and the next, and now another poured over them; the roof swayed, and a moment afterwards fell in with a crash, pulling the gable after it, and thrusting outwards the front wall of wood-work, which fell into the road with a rumbling echo; a cloud of black dust, myriads of sparks, and a great outburst of flame followed the uproar of the fall.

‘Who is she? what is she?’ burst from every lip again and again, incoherently, and without leaving a sufficient pause for a reply, had a reply been volunteered.

The autumn wind, tameless, and swift, and proud, still blew upon the dying old house, which was constructed so entirely of combustible materials that it burnt almost as fiercely as a corn-rick. The heat in the road increased, and now for an instant at the height of the conflagration all stood still, and gazed silently, awestruck and helpless, in the presence of so irresistible an enemy. Then, with minds full of the tragedy unfolded to them, they rushed forward again with the obtuse directness of waves, to their labour of saving goods from the houses adjoining, which it was evident were all doomed to destruction.

The minutes passed by. The Three Tranters Inn sank into a mere heap of red-hot charcoal: the fire pushed its way down the row as the church clock opposite slowly struck the hour of midnight, and the bewildered chimes, scarcely heard amid the crackling of the flames, wandered through the wayward air of the Old Hundred-and-Thirteenth Psalm.

4. NINE TO ELEVEN P.M.

Manston mounted his gig and set out from Chettlewood that evening in no very enviable frame of mind. The thought of domestic life in Knapwater Old House, with

the now eclipsed wife of the past, was more than disagreeable, was positively distasteful to him.

Yet he knew that the influential position, which, from whatever fortunate cause, he held on Miss Aldclyffe's manor, would never again fall to his lot on any other, and he tacitly assented to this dilemma, hoping that some consolation or other would soon suggest itself to him; married as he was, he was near Cytherea.

He occasionally looked at his watch as he drove along the lanes, timing the pace of his horse by the hour, that he might reach Carriford Road Station just soon enough to meet the last London train.

He soon began to notice in the sky a slight yellow halo, near the horizon. It rapidly increased; it changed colour, and grew redder; then the glare visibly brightened and dimmed at intervals, showing that its origin was affected by the strong wind prevailing.

Manston reined in his horse on the summit of a hill, and considered.

'It is a rick-yard on fire,' he thought; 'no house could produce such a raging flame so suddenly.'

He trotted on again, attempting to particularize the local features in the neighbourhood of the fire; but this it was too dark to do, and the excessive winding of the roads misled him as to its direction, not being an old inhabitant of the district, or a countryman used to forming such judgments; whilst the brilliancy of the light shortened its real remoteness to an apparent distance of not more than half: it seemed so near that he again stopped his horse, this time to listen; but he could hear no sound.

Entering now a narrow valley, the sides of which obscured the sky to an angle of perhaps thirty or forty degrees above the mathematical horizon, he was obliged to suspend his judgment till he was in possession of further knowledge, having however assumed in the interim, that the fire was somewhere between Carriford Road Station and the village.

The self-same glare had just arrested the eyes of another man. He was at that minute gliding along several miles to the east of the steward's position, but nearing the same point as that to which Manston tended. The younger Edward Springrove was returning from London to his father's house by the identical train which the steward was expecting to bring his wife, the truth being that Edward's lateness was owing to the simplest of all causes, his temporary want of money, which led him to make a slow journey for the sake of travelling at third-class fare.

Springrove had received Cytherea's bitter and admonitory letter, and he was clearly awakened to a perception of the false position in which he had placed himself, by keeping silence at Budmouth on his long engagement. An increasing reluctance to put an end to those few days of ecstasy with Cytherea had overruled his conscience, and tied his tongue till speaking was too late.

'Why did I do it? how could I dream of loving her?' he asked himself as he walked by day, as he tossed on his bed by night: 'miserable folly!'

An impressionable heart had for years — perhaps as many as six or seven years — been distracting him, by unconsciously setting itself to yearn for somebody wanting,

he scarcely knew whom. Echoes of himself, though rarely, he now and then found. Sometimes they were men, sometimes women, his cousin Adelaide being one of these; for in spite of a fashion which pervades the whole community at the present day — the habit of exclaiming that woman is not undeveloped man, but diverse, the fact remains that, after all, women are Mankind, and that in many of the sentiments of life the difference of sex is but a difference of degree.

But the indefinable helpmate to the remoter sides of himself still continued invisible. He grew older, and concluded that the ideas, or rather emotions, which possessed him on the subject, were probably too unreal ever to be found embodied in the flesh of a woman. Thereupon, he developed a plan of satisfying his dreams by wandering away to the heroines of poetical imagination, and took no further thought on the earthly realisation of his formless desire, in more homely matters satisfying himself with his cousin.

Cytherea appeared in the sky: his heart started up and spoke:

‘Tis She, and here

Lo! I unclothe and clear

My wishes’ cloudy character.’

Some women kindle emotion so rapidly in a man’s heart that the judgment cannot keep pace with its rise, and finds, on comprehending the situation, that faithfulness to the old love is already treachery to the new. Such women are not necessarily the greatest of their sex, but there are very few of them. Cytherea was one.

On receiving the letter from her he had taken to thinking over these things, and had not answered it at all. But ‘hungry generations’ soon tread down the muser in a city. At length he thought of the strong necessity of living. After a dreary search, the negligence of which was ultimately overcome by mere conscientiousness, he obtained a situation as assistant to an architect in the neighbourhood of Charing Cross: the duties would not begin till after the lapse of a month.

He could not at first decide whither he should go to spend the intervening time; but in the midst of his reasonings he found himself on the road homeward, impelled by a secret and unowned hope of getting a last glimpse of Cytherea there.

5. MIDNIGHT

It was a quarter to twelve when Manston drove into the station-yard. The train was punctual, and the bell, announcing its arrival, rang as he crossed the booking-office to go out upon the platform.

The porter who had accompanied Mrs. Manston to Carriford, and had returned to the station on his night duty, recognized the steward as he entered, and immediately came towards him.

‘Mrs. Manston came by the nine o’clock train, sir,’ he said.

The steward gave vent to an expression of vexation.

‘Her luggage is here, sir,’ the porter said.

‘Put it up behind me in the gig if it is not too much,’ said Manston.

‘Directly this train is in and gone, sir.’

The man vanished and crossed the line to meet the entering train.

‘Where is that fire?’ Manston said to the booking-clerk.

Before the clerk could speak, another man ran in and answered the question without having heard it.

‘Half Carriford is burnt down, or will be!’ he exclaimed. ‘You can’t see the flames from this station on account of the trees, but step on the bridge — ’tis tremendous!’

He also crossed the line to assist at the entry of the train, which came in the next minute.

The steward stood in the office. One passenger alighted, gave up his ticket, and crossed the room in front of Manston: a young man with a black bag and umbrella in his hand. He passed out of the door, down the steps, and struck out into the darkness.

‘Who was that young man?’ said Manston, when the porter had returned. The young man, by a kind of magnetism, had drawn the steward’s thoughts after him.

‘He’s an architect.’

‘My own old profession. I could have sworn it by the cut of him,’ Manston murmured. ‘What’s his name?’ he said again.

‘Springrove — Farmer Springrove’s son, Edward.’

‘Farmer Springrove’s son, Edward,’ the steward repeated to himself, and considered a matter to which the words had painfully recalled his mind.

The matter was Miss Aldclyffe’s mention of the young man as Cytherea’s lover, which, indeed, had scarcely ever been absent from his thoughts.

‘But for the existence of my wife that man might have been my rival,’ he pondered, following the porter, who had now come back to him, into the luggage-room. And whilst the man was carrying out and putting in one box, which was sufficiently portable for the gig, Manston still thought, as his eyes watched the process —

‘But for my wife, Springrove might have been my rival.’

He examined the lamps of his gig, carefully laid out the reins, mounted the seat and drove along the turnpike-road towards Knapwater Park.

The exact locality of the fire was plain to him as he neared home. He soon could hear the shout of men, the flapping of the flames, the crackling of burning wood, and could smell the smoke from the conflagration.

Of a sudden, a few yards ahead, within the compass of the rays from the right-hand lamp, burst forward the figure of a man. Having been walking in darkness the newcomer raised his hands to his eyes, on approaching nearer, to screen them from the glare of the reflector.

Manston saw that he was one of the villagers: a small farmer originally, who had drunk himself down to a day-labourer and reputed poacher.

‘Hoy!’ cried Manston, aloud, that the man might step aside out of the way.

‘Is that Mr. Manston?’ said the man.

‘Yes.’

‘Somebody ha’ come to Carriford: and the rest of it may concern you, sir.’

‘Well, well.’

‘Did you expect Mrs. Manston to-night, sir?’

‘Yes, unfortunately she’s come, I know, and asleep long before this time, I suppose.’

The labourer leant his elbow upon the shaft of the gig and turned his face, pale and sweating from his late work at the fire, up to Manston’s.

‘Yes, she did come,’ he said... ‘I beg pardon, sir, but I should be glad of — of — ’

‘What?’

‘Glad of a trifle for bringen ye the news.’

‘Not a farthing! I didn’t want your news, I knew she was come.’

‘Won’t you give me a shillen, sir?’

‘Certainly not.’

‘Then will you lend me a shillen, sir? I be tired out, and don’t know what to do. If I don’t pay you back some day I’ll be d — d.’

‘The devil is so cheated that perdition isn’t worth a penny as a security.’

‘Oh!’

‘Let me go on,’ said Manston.

‘Thy wife is dead; that’s the rest o’ the news,’ said the labourer slowly. He waited for a reply; none came.

‘She went to the Three Tranters, because she couldn’t get into thy house, the burnen roof fell in upon her before she could be called up, and she’s a cinder, as thou’lt be some day.’

‘That will do, let me drive on,’ said the steward calmly.

Expectation of a concussion may be so intense that its failure strikes the brain with more force than its fulfilment. The labourer sank back into the ditch. Such a Cushi could not realise the possibility of such an unmoved David as this.

Manston drove hastily to the turning of the road, tied his horse, and ran on foot to the site of the fire.

The stagnation caused by the awful accident had been passed through, and all hands were helping to remove from the remaining cottage what furniture they could lay hold of; the thatch of the roofs being already on fire. The Knapwater fire-engine had arrived on the spot, but it was small, and ineffectual. A group was collected round the rector, who in a coat which had become bespattered, scorched, and torn in his exertions, was directing on one hand the proceedings relative to the removal of goods into the church, and with the other was pointing out the spot on which it was most desirable that the puny engines at their disposal should be made to play. Every tongue was instantly silent at the sight of Manston’s pale and clear countenance, which contrasted strangely with the grimy and streaming faces of the toiling villagers.

‘Was she burnt?’ he said in a firm though husky voice, and stepping into the illuminated area. The rector came to him, and took him aside. ‘Is she burnt?’ repeated Manston.

‘She is dead: but thank God, she was spared the horrid agony of burning,’ the rector said solemnly; ‘the roof and gable fell in upon her, and crushed her. Instant death must have followed.’

‘Why was she here?’ said Manston.

‘From what we can hurriedly collect, it seems that she found the door of your house locked, and concluded that you had retired, the fact being that your servant, Mrs. Crickett, had gone out to supper. She then came back to the inn and went to bed.’

‘Where’s the landlord?’ said Manston.

Mr. Springrove came up, walking feebly, and wrapped in a cloak, and corroborated the evidence given by the rector.

‘Did she look ill, or annoyed, when she came?’ said the steward.

‘I can’t say. I didn’t see; but I think — ’

‘What do you think?’

‘She was much put out about something.’

‘My not meeting her, naturally,’ murmured the other, lost in reverie. He turned his back on Springrove and the rector, and retired from the shining light.

Everything had been done that could be done with the limited means at their disposal. The whole row of houses was destroyed, and each presented itself as one stage of a series, progressing from smoking ruins at the end where the inn had stood, to a partly flaming mass — glowing as none but wood embers will glow — at the other.

A feature in the decline of town fires was noticeably absent here — steam. There was present what is not observable in towns — incandescence.

The heat, and the smarting effect upon their eyes of the strong smoke from the burning oak and deal, had at last driven the villagers back from the road in front of the houses, and they now stood in groups in the churchyard, the surface of which, raised by the interments of generations, stood four or five feet above the level of the road, and almost even with the top of the low wall dividing one from the other. The headstones stood forth whitely against the dark grass and yews, their brightness being repeated on the white smock-frocks of some of the labourers, and in a mellower, ruddier form on their faces and hands, on those of the grinning gargoyles, and on other salient stonework of the weather-beaten church in the background.

The rector had decided that, under the distressing circumstances of the case, there would be no sacrilege in placing in the church, for the night, the pieces of furniture and utensils which had been saved from the several houses. There was no other place of safety for them, and they accordingly were gathered there.

6. HALF-PAST TWELVE TO ONE A.M.

Manston, when he retired to meditate, had walked round the churchyard, and now entered the opened door of the building.

He mechanically pursued his way round the piers into his own seat in the north aisle. The lower atmosphere of this spot was shaded by its own wall from the shine which streamed in over the window-sills on the same side. The only light burning inside the church was a small tallow candle, standing in the font, in the opposite aisle of the building to that in which Manston had sat down, and near where the furniture was piled. The candle’s mild rays were overpowered by the ruddier light from the ruins, making the weak flame to appear like the moon by day.

Sitting there he saw Farmer Springrove enter the door, followed by his son Edward, still carrying his travelling-bag in his hand. They were speaking of the sad death of Mrs. Manston, but the subject was relinquished for that of the houses burnt.

This row of houses, running from the inn eastward, had been built under the following circumstances: —

Fifty years before this date, the spot upon which the cottages afterwards stood was a blank strip, along the side of the village street, difficult to cultivate, on account of the outcrop thereon of a large bed of flints called locally a 'lanch' or 'lanchet.'

The Aldclyffe then in possession of the estate conceived the idea that a row of cottages would be an improvement to the spot, and accordingly granted leases of portions to several respectable inhabitants. Each lessee was to be subject to the payment of a merely nominal rent for the whole term of lives, on condition that he built his own cottage, and delivered it up intact at the end of the term.

Those who had built had, one by one, relinquished their indentures, either by sale or barter, to Farmer Springrove's father. New lives were added in some cases, by payment of a sum to the lord of the manor, etc., and all the leases were now held by the farmer himself, as one of the chief provisions for his old age.

The steward had become interested in the following conversation: —

'Try not to be so depressed, father; they are all insured.'

The words came from Edward in an anxious tone.

'You mistake, Edward; they are not insured,' returned the old man gloomily.

'Not?' the son asked.

'Not one!' said the farmer.

'In the Helmet Fire Office, surely?'

'They were insured there every one. Six months ago the office, which had been raising the premiums on thatched premises higher for some years, gave up insuring them altogether, as two or three other fire-offices had done previously, on account, they said, of the uncertainty and greatness of the risk of thatch undetached. Ever since then I have been continually intending to go to another office, but have never gone. Who expects a fire?'

'Do you remember the terms of the leases?' said Edward, still more uneasily.

'No, not particularly,' said his father absently.

'Where are they?'

'In the bureau there; that's why I tried to save it first, among other things.'

'Well, we must see to that at once.'

'What do you want?'

'The key.'

They went into the south aisle, took the candle from the font, and then proceeded to open the bureau, which had been placed in a corner under the gallery. Both leant over upon the flap; Edward holding the candle, whilst his father took the pieces of parchment from one of the drawers, and spread the first out before him.

‘You read it, Ted. I can’t see without my glasses. This one will be sufficient. The terms of all are the same.’

Edward took the parchment, and read quickly and indistinctly for some time; then aloud and slowly as follows: —

‘And the said John Springrove for himself his heirs executors and administrators doth covenant and agree with the said Gerald Fellcourt Aldclyffe his heirs and assigns that he the said John Springrove his heirs and assigns during the said term shall pay unto the said Gerald Fellcourt Aldclyffe his heirs and assigns the clear yearly rent of ten shillings and sixpence... at the several times hereinbefore appointed for the payment thereof respectively. And also shall and at all times during the said term well and sufficiently repair and keep the said Cottage or Dwelling-house and all other the premises and all houses or buildings erected or to be erected thereupon in good and proper repair in every respect without exception and the said premises in such good repair upon the determination of this demise shall yield up unto the said Gerald Fellcourt Aldclyffe his heirs and assigns.’

They closed the bureau and turned towards the door of the church without speaking.

Manston also had come forward out of the gloom. Notwithstanding the farmer’s own troubles, an instinctive respect and generous sense of sympathy with the steward for his awful loss caused the old man to step aside, that Manston might pass out without speaking to them if he chose to do so.

‘Who is he?’ whispered Edward to his father, as Manston approached.

‘Mr. Manston, the steward.’

Manston came near, and passed down the aisle on the side of the younger man. Their faces came almost close together: one large flame, which still lingered upon the ruins outside, threw long dancing shadows of each across the nave till they bent upwards against the aisle wall, and also illuminated their eyes, as each met those of the other. Edward had learnt, by a letter from home, of the steward’s passion for Cytherea, and his mysterious repression of it, afterwards explained by his marriage. That marriage was now nought. Edward realised the man’s newly acquired freedom, and felt an instinctive enmity towards him — he would hardly own to himself why. The steward, too, knew Cytherea’s attachment to Edward, and looked keenly and inscrutably at him.

7. ONE TO TWO A.M.

Manston went homeward alone, his heart full of strange emotions. Entering the house, and dismissing the woman to her own home, he at once proceeded upstairs to his bedroom.

Reasoning worldliness, especially when allied with sensuousness, cannot repress on some extreme occasions the human instinct to pour out the soul to some Being or Personality, who in frigid moments is dismissed with the title of Chance, or at most Law. Manston was selfishly and inhumanly, but honestly and unutterably, thankful for the recent catastrophe. Beside his bed, for that first time during a period of nearly twenty years, he fell down upon his knees in a passionate outburst of feeling.

Many minutes passed before he arose. He walked to the window, and then seemed to remember for the first time that some action on his part was necessary in connection with the sad circumstance of the night.

Leaving the house at once, he went to the scene of the fire, arriving there in time to hear the rector making an arrangement with a certain number of men to watch the spot till morning. The ashes were still red-hot and flaming. Manston found that nothing could be done towards searching them at that hour of the night. He turned homeward again, in the company of the rector, who had considerably persuaded him to retire from the scene for a while, and promised that as soon as a man could live amid the embers of the Three Tranters Inn, they should be carefully searched for the remains of his unfortunate wife.

Manston then went indoors, to wait for morning.

XI. THE EVENTS OF FIVE DAYS

1. NOVEMBER THE TWENTY-NINTH

The search began at dawn, but a quarter past nine o'clock came without bringing any result. Manston ate a little breakfast, and crossed the hollow of the park which intervened between the old and modern manor-houses, to ask for an interview with Miss Aldclyffe.

He met her midway. She was about to pay him a visit of condolence, and to place every man on the estate at his disposal, that the search for any relic of his dead and destroyed wife might not be delayed an instant.

He accompanied her back to the house. At first they conversed as if the death of the poor woman was an event which the husband must of necessity deeply lament; and when all under this head that social form seemed to require had been uttered, they spoke of the material damage done, and of the steps which had better be taken to remedy it.

It was not till both were shut inside her private room that she spoke to him in her blunt and cynical manner. A certain newness of bearing in him, peculiar to the present morning, had hitherto forbidden her this tone: the demeanour of the subject of her favouritism had altered, she could not tell in what way. He was entirely a changed man.

'Are you really sorry for your poor wife, Mr. Manston?' she said.

'Well, I am,' he answered shortly.

'But only as for any human being who has met with a violent death?'

He confessed it — 'For she was not a good woman,' he added.

'I should be sorry to say such a thing now the poor creature is dead,' Miss Aldclyffe returned reproachfully.

'Why?' he asked. 'Why should I praise her if she doesn't deserve it? I say exactly what I have often admired Sterne for saying in one of his letters — that neither reason

nor Scripture asks us to speak nothing but good of the dead. And now, madam,' he continued, after a short interval of thought, 'I may, perhaps, hope that you will assist me, or rather not thwart me, in endeavouring to win the love of a young lady living about you, one in whom I am much interested already.'

'Cytherea!'

'Yes, Cytherea.'

'You have been loving Cytherea all the while?'

'Yes.'

Surprise was a preface to much agitation in her, which caused her to rise from her seat, and pace to the side of the room. The steward quietly looked on and added, 'I have been loving and still love her.'

She came close up to him, wistfully contemplating his face, one hand moving indecisively at her side.

'And your secret marriage was, then, the true and only reason for that backwardness regarding the courtship of Cytherea, which, they tell me, has been the talk of the village; not your indifference to her attractions.' Her voice had a tone of conviction in it, as well as of inquiry; but none of jealousy.

'Yes,' he said; 'and not a dishonourable one. What held me back was just that one thing — a sense of morality that perhaps, madam, you did not give me credit for.' The latter words were spoken with a mien and tone of pride.

Miss Aldclyffe preserved silence.

'And now,' he went on, 'I may as well say a word in vindication of my conduct lately, at the risk, too, of offending you. My actual motive in submitting to your order that I should send for my late wife, and live with her, was not the mercenary policy of wishing to retain an office which brings me greater comforts than any I have enjoyed before, but this unquenchable passion for Cytherea. Though I saw the weakness, folly, and even wickedness of it continually, it still forced me to try to continue near her, even as the husband of another woman.'

He waited for her to speak: she did not.

'There's a great obstacle to my making any way in winning Miss Graye's love,' he went on.

'Yes, Edward Springrove,' she said quietly. 'I know it, I did once want to see them married; they have had a slight quarrel, and it will soon be made up again, unless —' she spoke as if she had only half attended to Manston's last statement.

'He is already engaged to be married to somebody else,' said the steward.

'Pooh!' said she, 'you mean to his cousin at Peakhill; that's nothing to help us; he's now come home to break it off.'

'He must not break it off,' said Manston, firmly and calmly.

His tone attracted her, startled her. Recovering herself, she said haughtily, 'Well, that's your affair, not mine. Though my wish has been to see her your wife, I can't do anything dishonourable to bring about such a result.'

‘But it must be made your affair,’ he said in a hard, steady voice, looking into her eyes, as if he saw there the whole panorama of her past.

One of the most difficult things to portray by written words is that peculiar mixture of moods expressed in a woman’s countenance when, after having been sedulously engaged in establishing another’s position, she suddenly suspects him of undermining her own. It was thus that Miss Aldclyffe looked at the steward.

‘You — know — something — of me?’ she faltered.

‘I know all,’ he said.

‘Then curse that wife of yours! She wrote and said she wouldn’t tell you!’ she burst out. ‘Couldn’t she keep her word for a day?’ She reflected and then said, but no more as to a stranger, ‘I will not yield. I have committed no crime. I yielded to her threats in a moment of weakness, though I felt inclined to defy her at the time: it was chiefly because I was mystified as to how she got to know of it. Pooh! I will put up with threats no more. O, can you threaten me?’ she added softly, as if she had for the moment forgotten to whom she had been speaking.

‘My love must be made your affair,’ he repeated, without taking his eyes from her.

An agony, which was not the agony of being discovered in a secret, obstructed her utterance for a time. ‘How can you turn upon me so when I schemed to get you here — schemed that you might win her till I found you were married. O, how can you! O!... O!’ She wept; and the weeping of such a nature was as harrowing as the weeping of a man.

‘Your getting me here was bad policy as to your secret — the most absurd thing in the world,’ he said, not heeding her distress. ‘I knew all, except the identity of the individual, long ago. Directly I found that my coming here was a contrived thing, and not a matter of chance, it fixed my attention upon you at once. All that was required was the mere spark of life, to make of a bundle of perceptions an organic whole.’

‘Policy, how can you talk of policy? Think, do think! And how can you threaten me when you know — you know — that I would befriend you readily without a threat!’

‘Yes, yes, I think you would,’ he said more kindly; ‘but your indifference for so many, many years has made me doubt it.’

‘No, not indifference — ’twas enforced silence. My father lived.’

He took her hand, and held it gently.

‘Now listen,’ he said, more quietly and humanly, when she had become calmer: ‘Springrove must marry the woman he’s engaged to. You may make him, but only in one way.’

‘Well: but don’t speak sternly, Aeneas!’

‘Do you know that his father has not been particularly thriving for the last two or three years?’

‘I have heard something of it, once or twice, though his rents have been promptly paid, haven’t they?’

‘O yes; and do you know the terms of the leases of the houses which are burnt?’ he said, explaining to her that by those terms she might compel him even to rebuild

every house. 'The case is the clearest case of fire by negligence that I have ever known, in addition to that,' he continued.

'I don't want them rebuilt; you know it was intended by my father, directly they fell in, to clear the site for a new entrance to the park?'

'Yes, but that doesn't affect the position, which is that Farmer Springrove is in your power to an extent which is very serious for him.'

'I won't do it — 'tis a conspiracy.'

'Won't you for me?' he said eagerly.

Miss Aldclyffe changed colour.

'I don't threaten now, I implore,' he said.

'Because you might threaten if you chose,' she mournfully answered. 'But why be so — when your marriage with her was my own pet idea long before it was yours? What must I do?'

'Scarcely anything: simply this. When I have seen old Mr. Springrove, which I shall do in a day or two, and told him that he will be expected to rebuild the houses, do you see the young man. See him yourself, in order that the proposals made may not appear to be anything more than an impulse of your own. You or he will bring up the subject of the houses. To rebuild them would be a matter of at least six hundred pounds, and he will almost surely say that we are hard in insisting upon the extreme letter of the leases. Then tell him that scarcely can you yourself think of compelling an old tenant like his father to any such painful extreme — there shall be no compulsion to build, simply a surrender of the leases. Then speak feelingly of his cousin, as a woman whom you respect and love, and whose secret you have learnt to be that she is heart-sick with hope deferred. Beg him to marry her, his betrothed and your friend, as some return for your consideration towards his father. Don't suggest too early a day for their marriage, or he will suspect you of some motive beyond womanly sympathy. Coax him to make a promise to her that she shall be his wife at the end of a twelvemonth, and get him, on assenting to this, to write to Cytherea, entirely renouncing her.'

'She has already asked him to do that.'

'So much the better — and telling her, too, that he is about to fulfil his long-standing promise to marry his cousin. If you think it worth while, you may say Cytherea was not indisposed to think of me before she knew I was married. I have at home a note she wrote me the first evening I saw her, which looks rather warm, and which I could show you. Trust me, he will give her up. When he is married to Adelaide Hinton, Cytherea will be induced to marry me — perhaps before; a woman's pride is soon wounded.'

'And hadn't I better write to Mr. Nyttleton, and inquire more particularly what's the law upon the houses?'

'O no, there's no hurry for that. We know well enough how the case stands — quite well enough to talk in general terms about it. And I want the pressure to be put upon young Springrove before he goes away from home again.'

She looked at him furtively, long, and sadly, as after speaking he became lost in thought, his eyes listlessly tracing the pattern of the carpet. 'Yes, yes, she will be

mine,' he whispered, careless of Cytherea Aldclyffe's presence. At last he raised his eyes inquiringly.

'I will do my best, AEneas,' she answered.

Talibus incusat. Manston then left the house, and again went towards the blackened ruins, where men were still raking and probing.

2. FROM NOVEMBER THE TWENTY-NINTH TO DECEMBER THE SECOND

The smouldering remnants of the Three Tranters Inn seemed to promise that, even when the searchers should light upon the remains of the unfortunate Mrs. Manston, very little would be discoverable.

Consisting so largely of the charcoal and ashes of hard dry oak and chestnut, intermingled with thatch, the interior of the heap was one glowing mass of embers, which, on being stirred about, emitted sparks and flame long after it was dead and black on the outside. It was persistently hoped, however, that some traces of the body would survive the effect of the hot coals, and after a search pursued uninterruptedly for thirty hours, under the direction of Manston himself, enough was found to set at rest any doubts of her fate.

The melancholy gleanings consisted of her watch, bunch of keys, a few coins, and two charred and blackened bones.

Two days later the official inquiry into the cause of her death was held at the Rising Sun Inn, before Mr. Floy, the coroner, and a jury of the chief inhabitants of the district. The little tavern — the only remaining one in the village — was crowded to excess by the neighbouring peasantry as well as their richer employers: all who could by any possibility obtain an hour's release from their duties being present as listeners.

The jury viewed the sad and infinitesimal remains, which were folded in a white cambric cloth, and laid in the middle of a well-finished coffin lined with white silk (by Manston's order), which stood in an adjoining room, the bulk of the coffin being completely filled in with carefully arranged flowers and evergreens — also the steward's own doing.

Abraham Brown, of Hoxton, London — an old white-headed man, without the ruddiness which makes white hairs so pleasing — was sworn, and deposed that he kept a lodging-house at an address he named. On a Saturday evening less than a month before the fire, a lady came to him, with very little luggage, and took the front room on the second floor. He did not inquire where she came from, as she paid a week in advance, but she gave her name as Mrs. Manston, referring him, if he wished for any guarantee of her respectability, to Mr. Manston, Knapwater Park. Here she lived for three weeks, rarely going out. She slept away from her lodgings one night during the time. At the end of that time, on the twenty-eighth of November, she left his house in a four-wheeled cab, about twelve o'clock in the day, telling the driver to take her to the Waterloo Station. She paid all her lodging expenses, and not having given notice the full week previous to her going away, offered to pay for the next, but he only took half. She wore a thick black veil, and grey waterproof cloak, when she left him, and

her luggage was two boxes, one of plain deal, with black japanned clamps, the other sewn up in canvas.

Joseph Chinney, porter at the Carriford Road Station, deposed that he saw Mrs. Manston, dressed as the last witness had described, get out of a second-class carriage on the night of the twenty-eighth. She stood beside him whilst her luggage was taken from the van. The luggage, consisting of the clamped deal box and another covered with canvas, was placed in the cloak-room. She seemed at a loss at finding nobody there to meet her. She asked him for some person to accompany her, and carry her bag to Mr. Manston's house, Knapwater Park. He was just off duty at that time, and offered to go himself. The witness here repeated the conversation he had had with Mrs. Manston during their walk, and testified to having left her at the door of the Three Tranters Inn, Mr. Manston's house being closed.

Next, Farmer Springrove was called. A murmur of surprise and commiseration passed round the crowded room when he stepped forward.

The events of the few preceding days had so worked upon his nervously thoughtful nature that the blue orbits of his eyes, and the mere spot of scarlet to which the ruddiness of his cheeks had contracted, seemed the result of a heavy sickness. A perfect silence pervaded the assembly when he spoke.

His statement was that he received Mrs. Manston at the threshold, and asked her to enter the parlour. She would not do so, and stood in the passage whilst the maid went upstairs to see that the room was in order. The maid came down to the middle landing of the staircase, when Mrs. Manston followed her up to the room. He did not speak ten words with her altogether.

Afterwards, whilst he was standing at the door listening for his son Edward's return, he saw her light extinguished, having first caught sight of her shadow moving about the room.

THE CORONER: 'Did her shadow appear to be that of a woman undressing?'

SPRINGROVE: 'I cannot say, as I didn't take particular notice. It moved backwards and forwards; she might have been undressing or merely pacing up and down the room.'

Mrs. Fidler, the ostler's wife and chambermaid, said that she preceded Mrs. Manston into the room, put down the candle, and went out. Mrs. Manston scarcely spoke to her, except to ask her to bring a little brandy. Witness went and fetched it from the bar, brought it up, and put it on the dressing-table.

THE CORONER: 'Had Mrs. Manston begun to undress, when you came back?'

'No, sir; she was sitting on the bed, with everything on, as when she came in.'

'Did she begin to undress before you left?'

'Not exactly before I had left; but when I had closed the door, and was on the landing I heard her boot drop on the floor, as it does sometimes when pulled off?'

'Had her face appeared worn and sleepy?'

'I cannot say as her bonnet and veil were still on when I left, for she seemed rather shy and ashamed to be seen at the Three Tranters at all.'

'And did you hear or see any more of her?'

‘No more, sir.’

Mrs. Crickett, temporary servant to Mr. Manston, said that in accordance with Mr. Manston’s orders, everything had been made comfortable in the house for Mrs. Manston’s expected return on Monday night. Mr. Manston told her that himself and Mrs. Manston would be home late, not till between eleven and twelve o’clock, and that supper was to be ready. Not expecting Mrs. Manston so early, she had gone out on a very important errand to Mrs. Leat the postmistress.

Mr. Manston deposed that in looking down the columns of Bradshaw he had mistaken the time of the train’s arrival, and hence was not at the station when she came. The broken watch produced was his wife’s — he knew it by a scratch on the inner plate, and by other signs. The bunch of keys belonged to her: two of them fitted the locks of her two boxes.

Mr. Flocks, agent to Lord Claydonfield at Chettlewood, said that Mr. Manston had pleaded as his excuse for leaving him rather early in the evening after their day’s business had been settled, that he was going to meet his wife at Carriford Road Station, where she was coming by the last train that night.

The surgeon said that the remains were those of a human being. The small fragment seemed a portion of one of the lumbar vertebrae — the other the head of the os femoris — but they were both so far gone that it was impossible to say definitely whether they belonged to the body of a male or female. There was no moral doubt that they were a woman’s. He did not believe that death resulted from burning by fire. He thought she was crushed by the fall of the west gable, which being of wood, as well as the floor, burnt after it had fallen, and consumed the body with it.

Two or three additional witnesses gave unimportant testimony.

The coroner summed up, and the jury without hesitation found that the deceased Mrs. Manston came by her death accidentally through the burning of the Three Tranters Inn.

3. DECEMBER THE SECOND. AFTERNOON

When Mr. Springrove came from the door of the Rising Sun at the end of the inquiry, Manston walked by his side as far as the stile to the park, a distance of about a stone’s-throw.

‘Ah, Mr. Springrove, this is a sad affair for everybody concerned.’

‘Everybody,’ said the old farmer, with deep sadness, ‘tis quite a misery to me. I hardly know how I shall live through each day as it breaks. I think of the words, “In the morning thou shalt say, Would God it were even! and at even thou shalt say, Would God it were morning! for the fear of thine heart wherewith thou shalt fear, and for the sight of thine eyes which thou shalt see.” His voice became broken.

‘Ah — true. I read Deuteronomy myself,’ said Manston.

‘But my loss is as nothing to yours,’ the farmer continued.

‘Nothing; but I can commiserate you. I should be worse than unfeeling if I didn’t, although my own affliction is of so sad and solemn a kind. Indeed my own loss makes me more keenly alive to yours, different in nature as it is.’

‘What sum do you think would be required of me to put the houses in place again?’

‘I have roughly thought six or seven hundred pounds.’

‘If the letter of the law is to be acted up to,’ said the old man, with more agitation in his voice.

‘Yes, exactly.’

‘Do you know enough of Miss Aldclyffe’s mind to give me an idea of how she means to treat me?’

‘Well, I am afraid I must tell you that though I know very little of her mind as a rule, in this matter I believe she will be rather peremptory; she might spare to the extent of a sixth or an eighth perhaps, in consideration of her getting new lamps for old, but I should hardly think more.’

The steward stepped upon the stile, and Mr. Springrove went along the road with a bowed head and heavy footsteps towards his niece’s cottage, in which, rather against the wish of Edward, they had temporarily taken refuge.

The additional weight of this knowledge soon made itself perceptible. Though indoors with Edward or Adelaide nearly the whole of the afternoon, nothing more than monosyllabic replies could be drawn from him. Edward continually discovered him looking fixedly at the wall or floor, quite unconscious of another’s presence. At supper he ate just as usual, but quite mechanically, and with the same abstraction.

4. DECEMBER THE THIRD

The next morning he was in no better spirits. Afternoon came: his son was alarmed, and managed to draw from him an account of the conversation with the steward.

‘Nonsense; he knows nothing about it,’ said Edward vehemently. ‘I’ll see Miss Aldclyffe myself. Now promise me, father, that you’ll not believe till I come back, and tell you to believe it, that Miss Aldclyffe will do any such unjust thing.’

Edward started at once for Knapwater House. He strode rapidly along the high-road, till he reached a wicket where a footpath allowed of a short cut to the mansion. Here he leant down upon the bars for a few minutes, meditating as to the best manner of opening his speech, and surveying the scene before him in that absent mood which takes cognizance of little things without being conscious of them at the time, though they appear in the eye afterwards as vivid impressions. It was a yellow, lustrous, late autumn day, one of those days of the quarter when morning and evening seem to meet together without the intervention of a noon. The clear yellow sunlight had tempted forth Miss Aldclyffe herself, who was at this same time taking a walk in the direction of the village. As Springrove lingered he heard behind the plantation a woman’s dress brushing along amid the prickly husks and leaves which had fallen into the path from the boughs of the chestnut trees. In another minute she stood in front of him.

He answered her casual greeting respectfully, and was about to request a few minutes’ conversation with her, when she directly addressed him on the subject of the fire. ‘It is a sad misfortune for your father’ she said, ‘and I hear that he has lately let his insurances expire?’

‘He has, madam, and you are probably aware that either by the general terms of his holding, or the same coupled with the origin of the fire, the disaster may involve the necessity of his rebuilding the whole row of houses, or else of becoming a debtor to the estate, to the extent of some hundreds of pounds?’

She assented. ‘I have been thinking of it,’ she went on, and then repeated in substance the words put into her mouth by the steward. Some disturbance of thought might have been fancied as taking place in Springrove’s mind during her statement, but before she had reached the end, his eyes were clear, and directed upon her.

‘I don’t accept your conditions of release,’ he said.

‘They are not conditions exactly.’

‘Well, whatever they are not, they are very uncalled-for remarks.’

‘Not at all — the houses have been burnt by your family’s negligence.’

‘I don’t refer to the houses — you have of course the best of all rights to speak of that matter; but you, a stranger to me comparatively, have no right at all to volunteer opinions and wishes upon a very delicate subject, which concerns no living beings but Miss Graye, Miss Hinton, and myself.’

Miss Aldclyffe, like a good many others in her position, had plainly not realised that a son of her tenant and inferior could have become an educated man, who had learnt to feel his individuality, to view society from a Bohemian standpoint, far outside the farming grade in Carriford parish, and that hence he had all a developed man’s unorthodox opinion about the subordination of classes. And fully conscious of the labyrinth into which he had wandered between his wish to behave honourably in the dilemma of his engagement to his cousin Adelaide and the intensity of his love for Cytherea, Springrove was additionally sensitive to any allusion to the case. He had spoken to Miss Aldclyffe with considerable warmth.

And Miss Aldclyffe was not a woman likely to be far behind any second person in warming to a mood of defiance. It seemed as if she were prepared to put up with a cold refusal, but that her haughtiness resented a criticism of her conduct ending in a rebuke. By this, Manston’s discreditable object, which had been made hers by compulsion only, was now adopted by choice. She flung herself into the work.

A fiery man in such a case would have relinquished persuasion and tried palpable force. A fiery woman added unscrupulousness and evolved daring strategy; and in her obstinacy, and to sustain herself as mistress, she descended to an action the meanness of which haunted her conscience to her dying hour.

‘I don’t quite see, Mr. Springrove,’ she said, ‘that I am altogether what you are pleased to call a stranger. I have known your family, at any rate, for a good many years, and I know Miss Graye particularly well, and her state of mind with regard to this matter.’

Perplexed love makes us credulous and curious as old women. Edward was willing, he owned it to himself, to get at Cytherea’s state of mind, even through so dangerous a medium.

‘A letter I received from her’ he said, with assumed coldness, ‘tells me clearly enough what Miss Graye’s mind is.’

‘You think she still loves you? O yes, of course you do — all men are like that.’

‘I have reason to.’ He could feign no further than the first speech.

‘I should be interested in knowing what reason?’ she said, with sarcastic archness.

Edward felt he was allowing her to do, in fractional parts, what he rebelled against when regarding it as a whole; but the fact that his antagonist had the presence of a queen, and features only in the early evening of their beauty, was not without its influence upon a keenly conscious man. Her bearing had charmed him into toleration, as Mary Stuart’s charmed the indignant Puritan visitors. He again answered her honestly.

‘The best of reasons — the tone of her letter.’

‘Pooh, Mr. Springrove!’

‘Not at all, Miss Aldclyffe! Miss Graye desired that we should be strangers to each other for the simple practical reason that intimacy could only make wretched complications worse, not from lack of love — love is only suppressed.’

‘Don’t you know yet, that in thus putting aside a man, a woman’s pity for the pain she inflicts gives her a kindness of tone which is often mistaken for suppressed love?’ said Miss Aldclyffe, with soft insidiousness.

This was a translation of the ambiguity of Cytherea’s tone which he had certainly never thought of; and he was too ingenuous not to own it.

‘I had never thought of it,’ he said.

‘And don’t believe it?’

‘Not unless there was some other evidence to support the view.’

She paused a minute and then began hesitatingly —

‘My intention was — what I did not dream of owning to you — my intention was to try to induce you to fulfil your promise to Miss Hinton not solely on her account and yours (though partly). I love Cytherea Graye with all my soul, and I want to see her happy even more than I do you. I did not mean to drag her name into the affair at all, but I am driven to say that she wrote that letter of dismissal to you — for it was a most pronounced dismissal — not on account of your engagement. She is old enough to know that engagements can be broken as easily as they can be made. She wrote it because she loved another man; very suddenly, and not with any idea or hope of marrying him, but none the less deeply.’

‘Who?’

‘Mr. Manston.’

‘Good — ! I can’t listen to you for an instant, madam; why, she hadn’t seen him!’

‘She had; he came here the day before she wrote to you; and I could prove to you, if it were worth while, that on that day she went voluntarily to his house, though not artfully or blamably; stayed for two hours playing and singing; that no sooner did she leave him than she went straight home, and wrote the letter saying she should not see you again, entirely because she had seen him and fallen desperately in love with him —

a perfectly natural thing for a young girl to do, considering that he's the handsomest man in the county. Why else should she not have written to you before?'

'Because I was such a — because she did not know of the connection between me and my cousin until then.'

'I must think she did.'

'On what ground?'

'On the strong ground of my having told her so, distinctly, the very first day she came to live with me.'

'Well, what do you seek to impress upon me after all? This — that the day Miss Graye wrote to me, saying it was better that we should part, coincided with the day she had seen a certain man — '

'A remarkably handsome and talented man.'

'Yes, I admit that.'

'And that it coincided with the hour just subsequent to her seeing him.'

'Yes, just when she had seen him.'

'And been to his house alone with him.'

'It is nothing.'

'And stayed there playing and singing with him.'

'Admit that, too,' he said; 'an accident might have caused it.'

'And at the same instant that she wrote your dismissal she wrote a letter referring to a secret appointment with him.'

'Never, by God, madam! never!'

'What do you say, sir?'

'Never.'

She sneered.

'There's no accounting for beliefs, and the whole history is a very trivial matter; but I am resolved to prove that a lady's word is truthful, though upon a matter which concerns neither you nor herself. You shall learn that she did write him a letter concerning an assignation — that is, if Mr. Manston still has it, and will be considerate enough to lend it me.'

'But besides,' continued Edward, 'a married man to do what would cause a young girl to write a note of the kind you mention!'

She flushed a little.

'That I don't know anything about,' she stammered. 'But Cytherea didn't, of course, dream any more than I did, or others in the parish, that he was married.'

'Of course she didn't.'

'And I have reason to believe that he told her of the fact directly afterwards, that she might not compromise herself, or allow him to. It is notorious that he struggled honestly and hard against her attractions, and succeeded in hiding his feelings, if not in quenching them.'

'We'll hope that he did.'

'But circumstances are changed now.'

‘Very greatly changed,’ he murmured abstractedly.

‘You must remember,’ she added more suavely, ‘that Miss Graye has a perfect right to do what she likes with her own — her heart, that is to say.’

Her descent from irritation was caused by perceiving that Edward’s faith was really disturbed by her strong assertions, and it gratified her.

Edward’s thoughts flew to his father, and the object of his interview with her. Tongue-fencing was utterly distasteful to him.

‘I will not trouble you by remaining longer, madam,’ he remarked, gloomily; ‘our conversation has ended sadly for me.’

‘Don’t think so,’ she said, ‘and don’t be mistaken. I am older than you are, many years older, and I know many things.’

Full of miserable doubt, and bitterly regretting that he had raised his father’s expectations by anticipations impossible of fulfilment, Edward slowly went his way into the village, and approached his cousin’s house. The farmer was at the door looking eagerly for him. He had been waiting there for more than half-an-hour. His eye kindled quickly.

‘Well, Ted, what does she say?’ he asked, in the intensely sanguine tones which fall sadly upon a listener’s ear, because, antecedently, they raise pictures of inevitable disappointment for the speaker, in some direction or another.

‘Nothing for us to be alarmed at,’ said Edward, with a forced cheerfulness.

‘But must we rebuild?’

‘It seems we must, father.’

The old man’s eyes swept the horizon, then he turned to go in, without making another observation. All light seemed extinguished in him again. When Edward went in he found his father with the bureau open, unfolding the leases with a shaking hand, folding them up again without reading them, then putting them in their niche only to remove them again.

Adelaide was in the room. She said thoughtfully to Edward, as she watched the farmer —

‘I hope it won’t kill poor uncle, Edward. What should we do if anything were to happen to him? He is the only near relative you and I have in the world.’ It was perfectly true, and somehow Edward felt more bound up with her after that remark.

She continued: ‘And he was only saying so hopefully the day before the fire, that he wouldn’t for the world let any one else give me away to you when we are married.’

For the first time a conscientious doubt arose in Edward’s mind as to the justice of the course he was pursuing in resolving to refuse the alternative offered by Miss Aldclyffe. Could it be selfishness as well as independence? How much he had thought of his own heart, how little he had thought of his father’s peace of mind!

The old man did not speak again till supper-time, when he began asking his son an endless number of hypothetical questions on what might induce Miss Aldclyffe to listen to kinder terms; speaking of her now not as an unfair woman, but as a Lachesis or Fate whose course it behoved nobody to condemn. In his earnestness he once turned his eyes

on Edward's face: their expression was woful: the pupils were dilated and strange in aspect.

'If she will only agree to that!' he reiterated for the hundredth time, increasing the sadness of his listeners.

An aristocratic knocking came to the door, and Jane entered with a letter, addressed

—
'MR. EDWARD SPRINGROVE, Junior.'

'Charles from Knapwater House brought it,' she said.

'Miss Aldclyffe's writing,' said Mr. Springrove, before Edward had recognized it himself. 'Now 'tis all right; she's going to make an offer; she doesn't want the houses there, not she; they are going to make that the way into the park.'

Edward opened the seal and glanced at the inside. He said, with a supreme effort of self-command —

'It is only directed by Miss Aldclyffe, and refers to nothing connected with the fire. I wonder at her taking the trouble to send it to-night.'

His father looked absently at him and turned away again. Shortly afterwards they retired for the night. Alone in his bedroom Edward opened and read what he had not dared to refer to in their presence.

The envelope contained another envelope in Cytherea's handwriting, addressed to '— — Manston, Esq., Old Manor House.' Inside this was the note she had written to the steward after her detention in his house by the thunderstorm —

'KNAPWATER HOUSE,
September 20th.

'I find I cannot meet you at seven o'clock by the waterfall as I promised. The emotion I felt made me forgetful of realities. 'C. GRAYE.'

Miss Aldclyffe had not written a line, and, by the unvarying rule observable when words are not an absolute necessity, her silence seemed ten times as convincing as any expression of opinion could have been.

He then, step by step, recalled all the conversation on the subject of Cytherea's feelings that had passed between himself and Miss Aldclyffe in the afternoon, and by a confusion of thought, natural enough under the trying experience, concluded that because the lady was truthful in her portraiture of effects, she must necessarily be right in her assumption of causes. That is, he was convinced that Cytherea — the hitherto-believed faithful Cytherea — had, at any rate, looked with something more than indifference upon the extremely handsome face and form of Manston.

Did he blame her, as guilty of the impropriety of allowing herself to love the new-comer in the face of his not being free to return her love? No; never for a moment did he doubt that all had occurred in her old, innocent, impulsive way; that her heart was gone before she knew it — before she knew anything, beyond his existence, of the man to whom it had flown. Perhaps the very note enclosed to him was the result of first reflection. Manston he would unhesitatingly have called a scoundrel, but for one strikingly redeeming fact. It had been patent to the whole parish, and had come to

Edward's own knowledge by that indirect channel, that Manston, as a married man, conscientiously avoided Cytherea after those first few days of his arrival during which her irresistibly beautiful and fatal glances had rested upon him — his upon her.

Taking from his coat a creased and pocket-worn envelope containing Cytherea's letter to himself, Springrove opened it and read it through. He was upbraided therein, and he was dismissed. It bore the date of the letter sent to Manston, and by containing within it the phrase, 'All the day long I have been thinking,' afforded justifiable ground for assuming that it was written subsequently to the other (and in Edward's sight far sweeter one) to the steward.

But though he accused her of fickleness, he would not doubt the genuineness, in its kind, of her partiality for him at Budmouth. It was a short and shallow feeling — not perfect love:

'Love is not love

Which alters when it alteration finds.'

But it was not flirtation; a feeling had been born in her and had died. It would be well for his peace of mind if his love for her could flit away so softly, and leave so few traces behind.

Miss Aldclyffe had shown herself desperately concerned in the whole matter by the alacrity with which she had obtained the letter from Manston, and her labours to induce himself to marry his cousin. Taken in connection with her apparent interest in, if not love for, Cytherea, her eagerness, too, could only be accounted for on the ground that Cytherea indeed loved the steward.

5. DECEMBER THE FOURTH

Edward passed the night he scarcely knew how, tossing feverishly from side to side, the blood throbbing in his temples, and singing in his ears.

Before the day began to break he dressed himself. On going out upon the landing he found his father's bedroom door already open. Edward concluded that the old man had risen softly, as was his wont, and gone out into the fields to start the labourers. But neither of the outer doors was unfastened. He entered the front room, and found it empty. Then animated by a new idea, he went round to the little back parlour, in which the few wrecks saved from the fire were deposited, and looked in at the door. Here, near the window, the shutters of which had been opened half way, he saw his father leaning on the bureau, his elbows resting on the flap, his body nearly doubled, his hands clasping his forehead. Beside him were ghostly-looking square folds of parchment — the leases of the houses destroyed.

His father looked up when Edward entered, and wearily spoke to the young man as his face came into the faint light.

'Edward, why did you get up so early?'

'I was uneasy, and could not sleep.'

The farmer turned again to the leases on the bureau, and seemed to become lost in reflection. In a minute or two, without lifting his eyes, he said —

‘This is more than we can bear, Ted — more than we can bear! Ted, this will kill me. Not the loss only — the sense of my neglect about the insurance and everything. Borrow I never will. ‘Tis all misery now. God help us — all misery now!’

Edward did not answer, continuing to look fixedly at the dreary daylight outside.

‘Ted,’ the farmer went on, ‘this upset of be-en burnt out o’ home makes me very nervous and doubtful about everything. There’s this troubles me besides — our liven here with your cousin, and fillen up her house. It must be very awkward for her. But she says she doesn’t mind. Have you said anything to her lately about when you are going to marry her?’

‘Nothing at all lately.’

‘Well, perhaps you may as well, now we are so mixed in together. You know, no time has ever been mentioned to her at all, first or last, and I think it right that now, since she has waited so patiently and so long — you are almost called upon to say you are ready. It would simplify matters very much, if you were to walk up to church wi’ her one of these mornings, get the thing done, and go on liven here as we are. If you don’t I must get a house all the sooner. It would lighten my mind, too, about the two little freeholds over the hill — not a morsel a-piece, divided as they were between her mother and me, but a tidy bit tied together again. Just think about it, will ye, Ted?’

He stopped from exhaustion produced by the intense concentration of his mind upon the weary subject, and looked anxiously at his son.

‘Yes, I will,’ said Edward.

‘But I am going to see her of the Great House this morning,’ the farmer went on, his thoughts reverting to the old subject. ‘I must know the rights of the matter, the when and the where. I don’t like seeing her, but I’d rather talk to her than the steward. I wonder what she’ll say to me.’

The younger man knew exactly what she would say. If his father asked her what he was to do, and when, she would simply refer him to Manston: her character was not that of a woman who shrank from a proposition she had once laid down. If his father were to say to her that his son had at last resolved to marry his cousin within the year, and had given her a promise to that effect, she would say, ‘Mr. Springrove, the houses are burnt: we’ll let them go: trouble no more about them.’

His mind was already made up. He said calmly, ‘Father, when you are talking to Miss Aldclyffe, mention to her that I have asked Adelaide if she is willing to marry me next Christmas. She is interested in my union with Adelaide, and the news will be welcome to her.’

‘And yet she can be iron with reference to me and her property,’ the farmer murmured. ‘Very well, Ted, I’ll tell her.’

6. DECEMBER THE FIFTH

Of the many contradictory particulars constituting a woman’s heart, two had shown their vigorous contrast in Cythrea’s bosom just at this time.

It was a dark morning, the morning after old Mr. Springrove’s visit to Miss Aldclyffe, which had terminated as Edward had intended. Having risen an hour earlier than was

usual with her, Cytherea sat at the window of an elegant little sitting-room on the ground floor, which had been appropriated to her by the kindness or whim of Miss Aldclyffe, that she might not be driven into that lady's presence against her will. She leant with her face on her hand, looking out into the gloomy grey air. A yellow glimmer from the flapping flame of the newly-lit fire fluttered on one side of her face and neck like a butterfly about to settle there, contrasting warmly with the other side of the same fair face, which received from the window the faint cold morning light, so weak that her shadow from the fire had a distinct outline on the window-shutter in spite of it. There the shadow danced like a demon, blue and grim.

The contradiction alluded to was that in spite of the decisive mood which two months earlier in the year had caused her to write a peremptory and final letter to Edward, she was now hoping for some answer other than the only possible one a man who, as she held, did not love her wildly, could send to such a communication. For a lover who did love wildly, she had left one little loophole in her otherwise straightforward epistle. Why she expected the letter on some morning of this particular week was, that hearing of his return to Carriford, she fondly assumed that he meant to ask for an interview before he left. Hence it was, too, that for the last few days, she had not been able to keep in bed later than the time of the postman's arrival.

The clock pointed to half-past seven. She saw the postman emerge from beneath the bare boughs of the park trees, come through the wicket, dive through the shrubbery, reappear on the lawn, stalk across it without reference to paths — as country postmen do — and come to the porch. She heard him fling the bag down on the seat, and turn away towards the village, without hindering himself for a single pace.

Then the butler opened the door, took up the bag, brought it in, and carried it up the staircase to place it on the slab by Miss Aldclyffe's dressing-room door. The whole proceeding had been depicted by sounds.

She had a presentiment that her letter was in the bag at last. She thought then in diminishing pulsations of confidence, 'He asks to see me! Perhaps he asks to see me: I hope he asks to see me.'

A quarter to eight: Miss Aldclyffe's bell — rather earlier than usual. 'She must have heard the post-bag brought,' said the maiden, as, tired of the chilly prospect outside, she turned to the fire, and drew imaginative pictures of her future therein.

A tap came to the door, and the lady's-maid entered.

'Miss Aldclyffe is awake,' she said; 'and she asked if you were moving yet, miss.'

'I'll run up to her,' said Cytherea, and flitted off with the utterance of the words. 'Very fortunate this,' she thought; 'I shall see what is in the bag this morning all the sooner.'

She took it up from the side table, went into Miss Aldclyffe's bedroom, pulled up the blinds, and looked round upon the lady in bed, calculating the minutes that must elapse before she looked at her letters.

‘Well, darling, how are you? I am glad you have come in to see me,’ said Miss Aldclyffe. ‘You can unlock the bag this morning, child, if you like,’ she continued, yawning factitiously.

‘Strange!’ Cytherea thought; ‘it seems as if she knew there was likely to be a letter for me.’

From her bed Miss Aldclyffe watched the girl’s face as she tremblingly opened the post-bag and found there an envelope addressed to her in Edward’s handwriting; one he had written the day before, after the decision he had come to on an impartial, and on that account torturing, survey of his own, his father’s, his cousin Adelaide’s, and what he believed to be Cytherea’s, position.

The haughty mistress’s soul sickened remorsefully within her when she saw suddenly appear upon the speaking countenance of the young lady before her a wan desolate look of agony.

The master-sentences of Edward’s letter were these: ‘You speak truly. That we never meet again is the wisest and only proper course. That I regret the past as much as you do yourself, it is hardly necessary for me to say.’

XII. THE EVENTS OF TEN MONTHS

1. DECEMBER TO APRIL

Week after week, month after month, the time had flown by. Christmas had passed; dreary winter with dark evenings had given place to more dreary winter with light evenings. Thaws had ended in rain, rain in wind, wind in dust. Showery days had come — the period of pink dawns and white sunsets; with the third week in April the cuckoo had appeared, with the fourth, the nightingale.

Edward Springrove was in London, attending to the duties of his new office, and it had become known throughout the neighbourhood of Carriford that the engagement between himself and Miss Adelaide Hinton would terminate in marriage at the end of the year.

The only occasion on which her lover of the idle delicious days at Budmouth watering-place had been seen by Cytherea after the time of the decisive correspondence, was once in church, when he sat in front of her, and beside Miss Hinton.

The rencounter was quite an accident. Springrove had come there in the full belief that Cytherea was away from home with Miss Aldclyffe; and he continued ignorant of her presence throughout the service.

It is at such moments as these, when a sensitive nature writhes under the conception that its most cherished emotions have been treated with contumely, that the sphere-descended Maid, Music, friend of Pleasure at other times, becomes a positive enemy — racking, bewildering, unrelenting. The congregation sang the first Psalm and came to the verse —

‘Like some fair tree which, fed by streams,

With timely fruit doth bend,
He still shall flourish, and success
All his designs attend.'

Cytherea's lips did not move, nor did any sound escape her; but could she help singing the words in the depths of her being, although the man to whom she applied them sat at her rival's side?

Perhaps the moral compensation for all a woman's petty cleverness under thriving conditions is the real nobility that lies in her extreme foolishness at these other times; her sheer inability to be simply just, her exercise of an illogical power entirely denied to men in general — the power not only of kissing, but of delighting to kiss the rod by a punctilious observance of the self-immolating doctrines in the Sermon on the Mount.

As for Edward — a little like other men of his temperament, to whom, it is somewhat humiliating to think, the aberrancy of a given love is in itself a recommendation — his sentiment, as he looked over his cousin's book, was of a lower rank, Horatian rather than Psalmic —

'O, what hast thou of her, of her
Whose every look did love inspire;
Whose every breathing fanned my fire,
And stole me from myself away!'

Then, without letting him see her, Cytherea slipped out of church early, and went home, the tones of the organ still lingering in her ears as she tried bravely to kill a jealous thought that would nevertheless live: 'My nature is one capable of more, far more, intense feeling than hers! She can't appreciate all the sides of him — she never will! He is more tangible to me even now, as a thought, than his presence itself is to her!' She was less noble then.

But she continually repressed her misery and bitterness of heart till the effort to do so showed signs of lessening. At length she even tried to hope that her lost lover and her rival would love one another very dearly.

The scene and the sentiment dropped into the past. Meanwhile, Manston continued visibly before her. He, though quiet and subdued in his bearing for a long time after the calamity of November, had not simulated a grief that he did not feel. At first his loss seemed so to absorb him — though as a startling change rather than as a heavy sorrow — that he paid Cytherea no attention whatever. His conduct was uniformly kind and respectful, but little more. Then, as the date of the catastrophe grew remoter, he began to wear a different aspect towards her. He always contrived to obliterate by his manner all recollection on her side that she was comparatively more dependent than himself — making much of her womanhood, nothing of her situation. Prompt to aid her whenever occasion offered, and full of delightful petits soins at all times, he was not officious. In this way he irresistibly won for himself a position as her friend, and the more easily in that he allowed not the faintest symptom of the old love to be apparent.

Matters stood thus in the middle of the spring when the next move on his behalf was made by Miss Aldclyffe.

2. THE THIRD OF MAY

She led Cytherea to a summer-house called the Fane, built in the private grounds about the mansion in the form of a Grecian temple; it overlooked the lake, the island on it, the trees, and their undisturbed reflection in the smooth still water. Here the old and young maid halted; here they stood, side by side, mentally imbibing the scene.

The month was May — the time, morning. Cuckoos, thrushes, blackbirds, and sparrows gave forth a perfect confusion of song and twitter. The road was spotted white with the fallen leaves of apple-blossoms, and the sparkling grey dew still lingered on the grass and flowers. Two swans floated into view in front of the women, and then crossed the water towards them.

‘They seem to come to us without any will of their own — quite involuntarily — don’t they?’ said Cytherea, looking at the birds’ graceful advance.

‘Yes, but if you look narrowly you can see their hips just beneath the water, working with the greatest energy.’

‘I’d rather not see that, it spoils the idea of proud indifference to direction which we associate with a swan.’

‘It does; we’ll have “involuntarily.” Ah, now this reminds me of something.’

‘Of what?’

‘Of a human being who involuntarily comes towards yourself.’

Cytherea looked into Miss Aldclyffe’s face; her eyes grew round as circles, and lines of wonderment came visibly upon her countenance. She had not once regarded Manston as a lover since his wife’s sudden appearance and subsequent death. The death of a wife, and such a death, was an overwhelming matter in her ideas of things.

‘Is it a man or woman?’ she said, quite innocently.

‘Mr. Manston,’ said Miss Aldclyffe quietly.

‘Mr. Manston attracted by me now?’ said Cytherea, standing at gaze.

‘Didn’t you know it?’

‘Certainly I did not. Why, his poor wife has only been dead six months.’

‘Of course he knows that. But loving is not done by months, or method, or rule, or nobody would ever have invented such a phrase as “falling in love.” He does not want his love to be observed just yet, on the very account you mention; but conceal it as he may from himself and us, it exists definitely — and very intensely, I assure you.’

‘I suppose then, that if he can’t help it, it is no harm of him,’ said Cytherea naively, and beginning to ponder.

‘Of course it isn’t — you know that well enough. She was a great burden and trouble to him. This may become a great good to you both.’

A rush of feeling at remembering that the same woman, before Manston’s arrival, had just as frankly advocated Edward’s claims, checked Cytherea’s utterance for awhile.

‘There, don’t look at me like that, for Heaven’s sake!’ said Miss Aldclyffe. ‘You could almost kill a person by the force of reproach you can put into those eyes of yours, I verily believe.’

Edward once in the young lady’s thoughts, there was no getting rid of him. She wanted to be alone.

‘Do you want me here?’ she said.

‘Now there, there; you want to be off, and have a good cry,’ said Miss Aldclyffe, taking her hand. ‘But you mustn’t, my dear. There’s nothing in the past for you to regret. Compare Mr. Manston’s honourable conduct towards his wife and yourself, with Springrove towards his betrothed and yourself, and then see which appears the more worthy of your thoughts.’

3. FROM THE FOURTH OF MAY TO THE TWENTY-FIRST OF JUNE

The next stage in Manston’s advances towards her hand was a clearly defined courtship. She was sadly perplexed, and some contrivance was necessary on his part in order to meet with her. But it is next to impossible for an appreciative woman to have a positive repugnance towards an unusually handsome and gifted man, even though she may not be inclined to love him. Hence Cytherea was not so alarmed at the sight of him as to render a meeting and conversation with her more than a matter of difficulty.

Coming and going from church was his grand opportunity. Manston was very religious now. It is commonly said that no man was ever converted by argument, but there is a single one which will make any Laodicean in England, let him be once love-sick, wear prayer-books and become a zealous Episcopalian — the argument that his sweetheart can be seen from his pew.

Manston introduced into his method a system of bewitching flattery, everywhere pervasive, yet, too, so transitory and intangible, that, as in the case of the poet Wordsworth and the Wandering Voice, though she felt it present, she could never find it. As a foil to heighten its effect, he occasionally spoke philosophically of the evanescence of female beauty — the worthlessness of mere appearance. ‘Handsome is that handsome does’ he considered a proverb which should be written on the looking-glass of every woman in the land. ‘Your form, your motions, your heart have won me,’ he said, in a tone of playful sadness. ‘They are beautiful. But I see these things, and it comes into my mind that they are doomed, they are gliding to nothing as I look. Poor eyes, poor mouth, poor face, poor maiden! “Where will her glories be in twenty years?” I say. “Where will all of her be in a hundred?” Then I think it is cruel that you should bloom a day, and fade for ever and ever. It seems hard and sad that you will die as ordinarily as I, and be buried; be food for roots and worms, be forgotten and come to earth, and grow up a mere blade of churchyard-grass and an ivy leaf. Then, Miss Graye, when I see you are a Lovely Nothing, I pity you, and the love I feel then is better and sounder, larger and more lasting than that I felt at the beginning.’ Again an ardent flash of his handsome eyes.

It was by this route that he ventured on an indirect declaration and offer of his hand.

She implied in the same indirect manner that she did not love him enough to accept it.

An actual refusal was more than he had expected. Cursing himself for what he called his egregious folly in making himself the slave of a mere lady's attendant, and for having given the parish, should they know of her refusal, a chance of sneering at him — certainly a ground for thinking less of his standing than before — he went home to the Old House, and walked indecisively up and down his back-yard. Turning aside, he leant his arms upon the edge of the rain-water-butt standing in the corner, and looked into it. The reflection from the smooth stagnant surface tinged his face with the greenish shades of Correggio's nudes. Staves of sunlight slanted down through the still pool, lighting it up with wonderful distinctness. Hundreds of thousands of minute living creatures sported and tumbled in its depth with every contortion that gaiety could suggest; perfectly happy, though consisting only of a head, or a tail, or at most a head and a tail, and all doomed to die within the twenty-four hours.

'Damn my position! Why shouldn't I be happy through my little day too? Let the parish sneer at my repulses, let it. I'll get her, if I move heaven and earth to do it!'

Indeed, the inexperienced Cytherea had, towards Edward in the first place, and Manston afterwards, unconsciously adopted bearings that would have been the very tactics of a professional fisher of men who wished to have them each successively dangling at her heels. For if any rule at all can be laid down in a matter which, for men collectively, is notoriously beyond regulation, it is that to snub a petted man, and to pet a snubbed man, is the way to win in suits of both kinds. Manston with Springrove's encouragement would have become indifferent. Edward with Manston's repulses would have sheered off at the outset, as he did afterwards. Her supreme indifference added fuel to Manston's ardour — it completely disarmed his pride. The invulnerable Nobody seemed greater to him than a susceptible Princess.

4. FROM THE TWENTY-FIRST OF JUNE TO THE END OF JULY

Cytherea had in the meantime received the following letter from her brother. It was the first definite notification of the enlargement of that cloud no bigger than a man's hand which had for nearly a twelvemonth hung before them in the distance, and which was soon to give a colour to their whole sky from horizon to horizon.

'BUDMOUTH REGIS,

Saturday.

'DARLING SIS, — I have delayed telling you for a long time of a little matter which, though not one to be seriously alarmed about, is sufficiently vexing, and it would be unfair in me to keep it from you any longer. It is that for some time past I have again been distressed by that lameness which I first distinctly felt when we went to Lulstead Cove, and again when I left Knapwater that morning early. It is an unusual pain in my left leg, between the knee and the ankle. I had just found fresh symptoms of it when you were here for that half-hour about a month ago — when you said in fun that I began to move like an old man. I had a good mind to tell you then, but fancying it would go off in a few days, I thought it was not worth while. Since that time it has

increased, but I am still able to work in the office, sitting on the stool. My great fear is that Mr. G. will have some out-door measuring work for me to do soon, and that I shall be obliged to decline it. However, we will hope for the best. How it came, what was its origin, or what it tends to, I cannot think. You shall hear again in a day or two, if it is no better... — Your loving brother, OWEN.'

This she answered, begging to know the worst, which she could bear, but suspense and anxiety never. In two days came another letter from him, of which the subjoined paragraph is a portion: —

'I had quite decided to let you know the worst, and to assure you that it was the worst, before you wrote to ask it. And again I give you my word that I will conceal nothing — so that there will be no excuse whatever for your wearing yourself out with fears that I am worse than I say. This morning then, for the first time, I have been obliged to stay away from the office. Don't be frightened at this, dear Cytherea. Rest is all that is wanted, and by nursing myself now for a week, I may avoid an illness of six months.'

After a visit from her he wrote again: —

'Dr. Chestman has seen me. He said that the ailment was some sort of rheumatism, and I am now undergoing proper treatment for its cure. My leg and foot have been placed in hot bran, liniments have been applied, and also severe friction with a pad. He says I shall be as right as ever in a very short time. Directly I am I shall run up by the train to see you. Don't trouble to come to me if Miss Aldclyffe grumbles again about your being away, for I am going on capitally... You shall hear again at the end of the week.'

At the time mentioned came the following: —

'I am sorry to tell you, because I know it will be so disheartening after my last letter, that I am not so well as I was then, and that there has been a sort of hitch in the proceedings. After I had been treated for rheumatism a few days longer (in which treatment they pricked the place with a long needle several times,) I saw that Dr. Chestman was in doubt about something, and I requested that he would call in a brother professional man to see me as well. They consulted together and then told me that rheumatism was not the disease after all, but erysipelas. They then began treating it differently, as became a different matter. Blisters, flour, and starch, seem to be the order of the day now — medicine, of course, besides.

'Mr. Gradfield has been in to inquire about me. He says he has been obliged to get a designer in my place, which grieves me very much, though, of course, it could not be avoided.'

A month passed away; throughout this period, Cytherea visited him as often as the limited time at her command would allow, and wore as cheerful a countenance as the womanly determination to do nothing which might depress him could enable her to wear. Another letter from him then told her these additional facts: —

'The doctors find they are again on the wrong tack. They cannot make out what the disease is. O Cytherea! how I wish they knew! This suspense is wearing me out.'

Could not Miss Aldclyffe spare you for a day? Do come to me. We will talk about the best course then. I am sorry to complain, but I am worn out.'

Cytherea went to Miss Aldclyffe, and told her of the melancholy turn her brother's illness had taken. Miss Aldclyffe at once said that Cytherea might go, and offered to do anything to assist her which lay in her power. Cytherea's eyes beamed gratitude as she turned to leave the room, and hasten to the station.

'O, Cytherea,' said Miss Aldclyffe, calling her back; 'just one word. Has Mr. Manston spoken to you lately?'

'Yes,' said Cytherea, blushing timorously.

'He proposed?'

'Yes.'

'And you refused him?'

'Yes.'

'Tut, tut! Now listen to my advice,' said Miss Aldclyffe emphatically, 'and accept him before he changes his mind. The chance which he offers you of settling in life is one that may possibly, probably, not occur again. His position is good and secure, and the life of his wife would be a happy one. You may not be sure that you love him madly; but suppose you are not sure? My father used to say to me as a child when he was teaching me whist, "When in doubt win the trick!" That advice is ten times as valuable to a woman on the subject of matrimony. In refusing a man there is always the risk that you may never get another offer.'

'Why didn't you win the trick when you were a girl?' said Cytherea.

'Come, my lady Pert; I'm not the text,' said Miss Aldclyffe, her face glowing like fire.

Cytherea laughed stealthily.

'I was about to say,' resumed Miss Aldclyffe severely, 'that here is Mr. Manston waiting with the tenderest solicitude for you, and you overlooking it, as if it were altogether beneath you. Think how you might benefit your sick brother if you were Mrs. Manston. You will please me very much by giving him some encouragement. You understand me, Cythie dear?'

Cytherea was silent.

'And,' said Miss Aldclyffe, still more emphatically, 'on your promising that you will accept him some time this year, I will take especial care of your brother. You are listening, Cytherea?'

'Yes,' she whispered, leaving the room.

She went to Budmouth, passed the day with her brother, and returned to Knapwater wretched and full of foreboding. Owen had looked startlingly thin and pale — thinner and paler than ever she had seen him before. The brother and sister had that day decided that notwithstanding the drain upon their slender resources, another surgeon should see him. Time was everything.

Owen told her the result in his next letter: —

‘The three practitioners between them have at last hit the nail on the head, I hope. They probed the place, and discovered that the secret lay in the bone. I underwent an operation for its removal three days ago (after taking chloroform)... Thank God it is over. Though I am so weak, my spirits are rather better. I wonder when I shall be at work again? I asked the surgeons how long it would be first. I said a month? They shook their heads. A year? I said. Not so long, they said. Six months? I inquired. They would not, or could not, tell me. But never mind.

‘Run down, when you have half a day to spare, for the hours drag on so drearily. O Cytherea, you can’t think how drearily!’

She went. Immediately on her departure Miss Aldclyffe sent a note to the Old House, to Manston. On the maiden’s return, tired and sick at heart as usual, she found Manston at the station awaiting her. He asked politely if he might accompany her to Knapwater. She tacitly acquiesced. During their walk he inquired the particulars of her brother’s illness, and with an irresistible desire to pour out her trouble to some one, she told him of the length of time which must elapse before he could be strong again, and of the lack of comfort in lodgings.

Manston was silent awhile. Then he said impetuously: ‘Miss Graye, I will not mince matters — I love you — you know it. Stratagem they say is fair in love, and I am compelled to adopt it now. Forgive me, for I cannot help it. Consent to be my wife at any time that may suit you — any remote day you may name will satisfy me — and you shall find him well provided for.’

For the first time in her life she truly dreaded the handsome man at her side who pleaded thus selfishly, and shrank from the hot voluptuous nature of his passion for her, which, disguise it as he might under a quiet and polished exterior, at times radiated forth with a scorching white heat. She perceived how animal was the love which bargained.

‘I do not love you, Mr. Manston,’ she replied coldly.

5. FROM THE FIRST TO THE TWENTY-SEVENTH OF AUGUST

The long sunny days of the later summer-time brought only the same dreary accounts from Budmouth, and saw Cytherea paying the same sad visits.

She grew perceptibly weaker, in body and mind. Manston still persisted in his suit, but with more of his former indirectness, now that he saw how unexpectedly well she stood an open attack. His was the system of Dares at the Sicilian games —

‘He, like a captain who beleaguers round
Some strong-built castle on a rising ground,
Views all the approaches with observing eyes,
This and that other part again he tries,
And more on industry than force relies.’

Miss Aldclyffe made it appear more clearly than ever that aid to Owen from herself depended entirely upon Cytherea’s acceptance of her steward. Hemmed in and distressed, Cytherea’s answers to his importunities grew less uniform; they were firm, or wavering, as Owen’s malady fluctuated. Had a register of her pitiful oscillations

been kept, it would have rivalled in pathos the diary wherein De Quincey tabulates his combat with Opium — perhaps as noticeable an instance as any in which a thrilling dramatic power has been given to mere numerals. Thus she wearily and monotonously lived through the month, listening on Sundays to the well-known round of chapters narrating the history of Elijah and Elisha in famine and drought; on week-days to buzzing flies in hot sunny rooms. ‘So like, so very like, was day to day.’ Extreme lassitude seemed all that the world could show her.

Her state was in this wise, when one afternoon, having been with her brother, she met the surgeon, and begged him to tell the actual truth concerning Owen’s condition.

The reply was that he feared that the first operation had not been thorough; that although the wound had healed, another attempt might still be necessary, unless nature were left to effect her own cure. But the time such a self-healing proceeding would occupy might be ruinous.

‘How long would it be?’ she said.

‘It is impossible to say. A year or two, more or less.’

‘And suppose he submitted to another artificial extraction?’

‘Then he might be well in four or six months.’

Now the remainder of his and her possessions, together with a sum he had borrowed, would not provide him with necessary comforts for half that time. To combat the misfortune, there were two courses open — her becoming betrothed to Manston, or the sending Owen to the County Hospital.

Thus terrified, driven into a corner, panting and fluttering about for some loophole of escape, yet still shrinking from the idea of being Manston’s wife, the poor little bird endeavoured to find out from Miss Aldclyffe whether it was likely Owen would be well treated in the hospital.

‘County Hospital!’ said Miss Aldclyffe; ‘why, it is only another name for slaughter-house — in surgical cases at any rate. Certainly if anything about your body is snapt in two they do join you together in a fashion, but ‘tis so askew and ugly, that you may as well be apart again.’ Then she terrified the inquiring and anxious maiden by relating horrid stories of how the legs and arms of poor people were cut off at a moment’s notice, especially in cases where the restorative treatment was likely to be long and tedious.

‘You know how willing I am to help you, Cytherea,’ she added reproachfully. ‘You know it. Why are you so obstinate then? Why do you selfishly bar the clear, honourable, and only sisterly path which leads out of this difficulty? I cannot, on my conscience, countenance you; no, I cannot.’

Manston once more repeated his offer; and once more she refused, but this time weakly, and with signs of an internal struggle. Manston’s eye sparkled; he saw for the hundredth time in his life, that perseverance, if only systematic, was irresistible by womankind.

6. THE TWENTY-SEVENTH OF AUGUST

On going to Budmouth three days later, she found to her surprise that the steward had been there, had introduced himself, and had seen her brother. A few delicacies had been brought him also by the same hand. Owen spoke in warm terms of Manston and his free and unceremonious call, as he could not have refrained from doing of any person, of any kind, whose presence had served to help away the tedious hours of a long day, and who had, moreover, shown that sort of consideration for him which the accompanying basket implied — antecedent consideration, so telling upon all invalids — and which he so seldom experienced except from the hands of his sister.

How should he perceive, amid this tithe-paying of mint, and anise, and cummin, the weightier matters which were left undone?

Again the steward met her at Carriford Road Station on her return journey. Instead of being frigid as at the former meeting at the same place, she was embarrassed by a strife of thought, and murmured brokenly her thanks for what he had done. The same request that he might see her home was made.

He had perceived his error in making his kindness to Owen a conditional kindness, and had hastened to efface all recollection of it. 'Though I let my offer on her brother's — my friend's — behalf, seem dependent on my lady's graciousness to me,' he whispered wooingly in the course of their walk, 'I could not conscientiously adhere to my statement; it was said with all the impulsive selfishness of love. Whether you choose to have me, or whether you don't, I love you too devotedly to be anything but kind to your brother... Miss Graye, Cytherea, I will do anything,' he continued earnestly, 'to give you pleasure — indeed I will.'

She saw on the one hand her poor and much-loved Owen recovering from his illness and troubles by the disinterested kindness of the man beside her, on the other she drew him dying, wholly by reason of her self-enforced poverty. To marry this man was obviously the course of common sense, to refuse him was impolitic temerity. There was reason in this. But there was more behind than a hundred reasons — a woman's gratitude and her impulse to be kind.

The wavering of her mind was visible in her tell-tale face. He noticed it, and caught at the opportunity.

They were standing by the ruinous foundations of an old mill in the midst of a meadow. Between grey and half-overgrown stonework — the only signs of masonry remaining — the water gurgled down from the old millpond to a lower level, under the cloak of rank broad leaves — the sensuous natures of the vegetable world. On the right hand the sun, resting on the horizon-line, streamed across the ground from below copper-coloured and lilac clouds, stretched out in flats beneath a sky of pale soft green. All dark objects on the earth that lay towards the sun were overspread by a purple haze, against which a swarm of wailing gnats shone forth luminously, rising upward and floating away like sparks of fire.

The stillness oppressed and reduced her to mere passivity. The only wish the humidity of the place left in her was to stand motionless. The helpless flatness of the

landscape gave her, as it gives all such temperaments, a sense of bare equality with, and no superiority to, a single entity under the sky.

He came so close that their clothes touched. 'Will you try to love me? Do try to love me!' he said, in a whisper, taking her hand. He had never taken it before. She could feel his hand trembling exceedingly as it held hers in its clasp.

Considering his kindness to her brother, his love for herself, and Edward's fickleness, ought she to forbid him to do this? How truly pitiful it was to feel his hand tremble so — all for her! Should she withdraw her hand? She would think whether she would. Thinking, and hesitating, she looked as far as the autumnal haze on the marshy ground would allow her to see distinctly. There was the fragment of a hedge — all that remained of a 'wet old garden' — standing in the middle of the mead, without a definite beginning or ending, purposeless and valueless. It was overgrown, and choked with mandrakes, and she could almost fancy she heard their shrieks... Should she withdraw her hand? No, she could not withdraw it now; it was too late, the act would not imply refusal. She felt as one in a boat without oars, drifting with closed eyes down a river — she knew not whither.

He gave her hand a gentle pressure, and relinquished it.

Then it seemed as if he were coming to the point again. No, he was not going to urge his suit that evening. Another respite.

7. THE EARLY PART OF SEPTEMBER

Saturday came, and she went on some trivial errand to the village post-office. It was a little grey cottage with a luxuriant jasmine encircling the doorway, and before going in Cytherea paused to admire this pleasing feature of the exterior. Hearing a step on the gravel behind the corner of the house, she resigned the jasmine and entered. Nobody was in the room. She could hear Mrs. Leat, the widow who acted as postmistress, walking about over her head. Cytherea was going to the foot of the stairs to call Mrs. Leat, but before she had accomplished her object, another form stood at the half-open door. Manston came in.

'Both on the same errand,' he said gracefully.

'I will call her,' said Cytherea, moving in haste to the foot of the stairs.

'One moment.' He glided to her side. 'Don't call her for a moment,' he repeated.

But she had said, 'Mrs. Leat!'

He seized Cytherea's hand, kissed it tenderly, and carefully replaced it by her side.

She had that morning determined to check his further advances, until she had thoroughly considered her position. The remonstrance was now on her tongue, but as accident would have it, before the word could be spoken Mrs. Leat was stepping from the last stair to the floor, and no remonstrance came.

With the subtlety which characterized him in all his dealings with her, he quickly concluded his own errand, bade her a good-bye, in the tones of which love was so garnished with pure politeness that it only showed its presence to herself, and left the house — putting it out of her power to refuse him her companionship homeward, or to object to his late action of kissing her hand.

The Friday of the next week brought another letter from her brother. In this he informed her that, in absolute grief lest he should distress her unnecessarily, he had some time earlier borrowed a few pounds. A week ago, he said, his creditor became importunate, but that on the day on which he wrote, the creditor had told him there was no hurry for a settlement, that 'his sister's suitor had guaranteed the sum.' 'Is he Mr. Manston? tell me, Cytherea,' said Owen.

He also mentioned that a wheeled chair had been anonymously hired for his especial use, though as yet he was hardly far enough advanced towards convalescence to avail himself of the luxury. 'Is this Mr. Manston's doing?' he inquired.

She could dally with her perplexity, evade it, trust to time for guidance, no longer. The matter had come to a crisis: she must once and for all choose between the dictates of her understanding and those of her heart. She longed, till her soul seemed nigh to bursting, for her lost mother's return to earth, but for one minute, that she might have tender counsel to guide her through this, her great difficulty.

As for her heart, she half fancied that it was not Edward's to quite the extent that it once had been; she thought him cruel in conducting himself towards her as he did at Budmouth, cruel afterwards in making so light of her. She knew he had stifled his love for her — was utterly lost to her. But for all that she could not help indulging in a woman's pleasure of recreating defunct agonies, and lacerating herself with them now and then.

'If I were rich,' she thought, 'I would give way to the luxury of being morbidly faithful to him for ever without his knowledge.'

But she considered; in the first place she was a homeless dependent; and what did practical wisdom tell her to do under such desperate circumstances? To provide herself with some place of refuge from poverty, and with means to aid her brother Owen. This was to be Mr. Manston's wife.

She did not love him.

But what was love without a home? Misery. What was a home without love? Alas, not much; but still a kind of home.

'Yes,' she thought, 'I am urged by my common sense to marry Mr. Manston.'

Did anything nobler in her say so too?

With the death (to her) of Edward her heart's occupation was gone. Was it necessary or even right for her to tend it and take care of it as she used to in the old time, when it was still a capable minister?

By a slight sacrifice here she could give happiness to at least two hearts whose emotional activities were still unwounded. She would do good to two men whose lives were far more important than hers.

'Yes,' she said again, 'even Christianity urges me to marry Mr. Manston.'

Directly Cytherea had persuaded herself that a kind of heroic self-abnegation had to do with the matter, she became much more content in the consideration of it. A wilful indifference to the future was what really prevailed in her, ill and worn out, as she was, by the perpetual harassments of her sad fortune, and she regarded this indif-

ference, as gushing natures will do under such circumstances, as genuine resignation and devotedness.

Manston met her again the following day: indeed, there was no escaping him now. At the end of a short conversation between them, which took place in the hollow of the park by the waterfall, obscured on the outer side by the low hanging branches of the limes, she tacitly assented to his assumption of a privilege greater than any that had preceded it. He stooped and kissed her brow.

Before going to bed she wrote to Owen explaining the whole matter. It was too late in the evening for the postman's visit, and she placed the letter on the mantelpiece to send it the next day.

The morning (Sunday) brought a hurried postscript to Owen's letter of the day before: —

‘September 9, 1865.

‘DEAR CYTHEREA — I have received a frank and friendly letter from Mr. Manston explaining the position in which he stands now, and also that in which he hopes to stand towards you. Can't you love him? Why not? Try, for he is a good, and not only that, but a cultured man. Think of the weary and laborious future that awaits you if you continue for life in your present position, and do you see any way of escape from it except by marriage? I don't. Don't go against your heart, Cytherea, but be wise. — Ever affectionately yours, OWEN.’

She thought that probably he had replied to Mr. Manston in the same favouring mood. She had a conviction that that day would settle her doom. Yet

‘So true a fool is love,’

that even now she nourished a half-hope that something would happen at the last moment to thwart her deliberately-formed intentions, and favour the old emotion she was using all her strength to thrust down.

8. THE TENTH OF SEPTEMBER

The Sunday was the thirteenth after Trinity, and the afternoon service at Carriford was nearly over. The people were singing the Evening Hymn.

Manston was at church as usual in his accustomed place two seats forward from the large square pew occupied by Miss Aldclyffe and Cytherea.

The ordinary sadness of an autumnal evening-service seemed, in Cytherea's eyes, to be doubled on this particular occasion. She looked at all the people as they stood and sang, waving backwards and forwards like a forest of pines swayed by a gentle breeze; then at the village children singing too, their heads inclined to one side, their eyes listlessly tracing some crack in the old walls, or following the movement of a distant bough or bird with features petrified almost to painfulness. Then she looked at Manston; he was already regarding her with some purpose in his glance.

‘It is coming this evening,’ she said in her mind. A minute later, at the end of the hymn, when the congregation began to move out, Manston came down the aisle. He was opposite the end of her seat as she stepped from it, the remainder of their progress to the door being in contact with each other. Miss Aldclyffe had lingered behind.

‘Don’t let’s hurry,’ he said, when Cytherea was about to enter the private path to the House as usual. ‘Would you mind turning down this way for a minute till Miss Aldclyffe has passed?’

She could not very well refuse now. They turned into a secluded path on their left, leading round through a thicket of laurels to the other gate of the church-yard, walking very slowly. By the time the further gate was reached, the church was closed. They met the sexton with the keys in his hand.

‘We are going inside for a minute,’ said Manston to him, taking the keys unceremoniously. ‘I will bring them to you when we return.’

The sexton nodded his assent, and Cytherea and Manston walked into the porch, and up the nave.

They did not speak a word during their progress, or in any way interfere with the stillness and silence that prevailed everywhere around them. Everything in the place was the embodiment of decay: the fading red glare from the setting sun, which came in at the west window, emphasizing the end of the day and all its cheerful doings, the mildewed walls, the uneven paving-stones, the wormy pews, the sense of recent occupation, and the dank air of death which had gathered with the evening, would have made grave a lighter mood than Cytherea’s was then.

‘What sensations does the place impress you with?’ she said at last, very sadly.

‘I feel imperatively called upon to be honest, from very despair of achieving anything by stratagem in a world where the materials are such as these.’ He, too, spoke in a depressed voice, purposely or otherwise.

‘I feel as if I were almost ashamed to be seen walking such a world,’ she murmured; ‘that’s the effect it has upon me; but it does not induce me to be honest particularly.’

He took her hand in both his, and looked down upon the lids of her eyes.

‘I pity you sometimes,’ he said more emphatically.

‘I am pitiable, perhaps; so are many people. Why do you pity me?’

‘I think that you make yourself needlessly sad.’

‘Not needlessly.’

‘Yes, needlessly. Why should you be separated from your brother so much, when you might have him to stay with you till he is well?’

‘That can’t be,’ she said, turning away.

He went on, ‘I think the real and only good thing that can be done for him is to get him away from Budmouth awhile; and I have been wondering whether it could not be managed for him to come to my house to live for a few weeks. Only a quarter of a mile from you. How pleasant it would be!’

‘It would.’

He moved himself round immediately to the front of her, and held her hand more firmly, as he continued, ‘Cytherea, why do you say “It would,” so entirely in the tone of abstract supposition? I want him there: I want him to be my brother, too. Then make him so, and be my wife! I cannot live without you. O Cytherea, my darling, my love, come and be my wife!’

His face bent closer and closer to hers, and the last words sank to a whisper as weak as the emotion inspiring it was strong.

She said firmly and distinctly, 'Yes, I will.'

'Next month?' he said on the instant, before taking breath.

'No; not next month.'

'The next?'

'No.'

'December? Christmas Day, say?'

'I don't mind.'

'O, you darling!' He was about to imprint a kiss upon her pale, cold mouth, but she hastily covered it with her hand.

'Don't kiss me — at least where we are now!' she whispered imploringly.

'Why?'

'We are too near God.'

He gave a sudden start, and his face flushed. She had spoken so emphatically that the words 'Near God' echoed back again through the hollow building from the far end of the chancel.

'What a thing to say!' he exclaimed; 'surely a pure kiss is not inappropriate to the place!'

'No,' she replied, with a swelling heart; 'I don't know why I burst out so — I can't tell what has come over me! Will you forgive me?'

'How shall I say "Yes" without judging you? How shall I say "No" without losing the pleasure of saying "Yes?"' He was himself again.

'I don't know,' she absently murmured.

'I'll say "Yes,"' he answered daintily. 'It is sweeter to fancy we are forgiven, than to think we have not sinned; and you shall have the sweetness without the need.'

She did not reply, and they moved away. The church was nearly dark now, and melancholy in the extreme. She stood beside him while he locked the door, then took the arm he gave her, and wound her way out of the churchyard with him. Then they walked to the house together, but the great matter having been set at rest, she persisted in talking only on indifferent subjects.

'Christmas Day, then,' he said, as they were parting at the end of the shrubbery.

'I meant Old Christmas Day,' she said evasively.

'H'm, people do not usually attach that meaning to the words.'

'No; but I should like it best if it could not be till then?' It seemed to be still her instinct to delay the marriage to the utmost.

'Very well, love,' he said gently. "'Tis a fortnight longer still; but never mind. Old Christmas Day.'

9. THE ELEVENTH OF SEPTEMBER

'There. It will be on a Friday!'

She sat upon a little footstool gazing intently into the fire. It was the afternoon of the day following that of the steward's successful solicitation of her hand.

‘I wonder if it would be proper in me to run across the park and tell him it is a Friday?’ she said to herself, rising to her feet, looking at her hat lying near, and then out of the window towards the Old House. Proper or not, she felt that she must at all hazards remove the disagreeable, though, as she herself owned, unfounded impression the coincidence had occasioned. She left the house directly, and went to search for him.

Manston was in the timber-yard, looking at the sawyers as they worked. Cytherea came up to him hesitatingly. Till within a distance of a few yards she had hurried forward with alacrity — now that the practical expression of his face became visible she wished almost she had never sought him on such an errand; in his business-mood he was perhaps very stern.

‘It will be on a Friday,’ she said confusedly, and without any preface.

‘Come this way!’ said Manston, in the tone he used for workmen, not being able to alter at an instant’s notice. He gave her his arm and led her back into the avenue, by which time he was lover again. ‘On a Friday, will it, dearest? You do not mind Fridays, surely? That’s nonsense.’

‘Not seriously mind them, exactly — but if it could be any other day?’

‘Well, let us say Old Christmas Eve, then. Shall it be Old Christmas Eve?’

‘Yes, Old Christmas Eve.’

‘Your word is solemn, and irrevocable now?’

‘Certainly, I have solemnly pledged my word; I should not have promised to marry you if I had not meant it. Don’t think I should.’ She spoke the words with a dignified impressiveness.

‘You must not be vexed at my remark, dearest. Can you think the worse of an ardent man, Cytherea, for showing some anxiety in love?’

‘No, no.’ She could not say more. She was always ill at ease when he spoke of himself as a piece of human nature in that analytical way, and wanted to be out of his presence. The time of day, and the proximity of the house, afforded her a means of escape. ‘I must be with Miss Aldclyffe now — will you excuse my hasty coming and going?’ she said prettily. Before he had replied she had parted from him.

‘Cytherea, was it Mr. Manston I saw you scudding away from in the avenue just now?’ said Miss Aldclyffe, when Cytherea joined her.

‘Yes.’

‘“Yes.” Come, why don’t you say more than that? I hate those taciturn “Yesses” of yours. I tell you everything, and yet you are as close as wax with me.’

‘I parted from him because I wanted to come in.’

‘What a novel and important announcement! Well, is the day fixed?’

‘Yes.’

Miss Aldclyffe’s face kindled into intense interest at once. ‘Is it indeed? When is it to be?’

‘On Old Christmas Eve.’

‘Old Christmas Eve.’ Miss Aldclyffe drew Cytherea round to her front, and took a hand in each of her own. ‘And then you will be a bride!’ she said slowly, looking with critical thoughtfulness upon the maiden’s delicately rounded cheeks.

The normal area of the colour upon each of them decreased perceptibly after that slow and emphatic utterance by the elder lady.

Miss Aldclyffe continued impressively, ‘You did not say “Old Christmas Eve” as a fiancee should have said the words: and you don’t receive my remark with the warm excitement that foreshadows a bright future... How many weeks are there to the time?’

‘I have not reckoned them.’

‘Not? Fancy a girl not counting the weeks! I find I must take the lead in this matter — you are so childish, or frightened, or stupid, or something, about it. Bring me my diary, and we will count them at once.’

Cytherea silently fetched the book.

Miss Aldclyffe opened the diary at the page containing the almanac, and counted sixteen weeks, which brought her to the thirty-first of December — a Sunday. Cytherea stood by, looking on as if she had no appetite for the scene.

‘Sixteen to the thirty-first. Then let me see, Monday will be the first of January, Tuesday the second, Wednesday third, Thursday fourth, Friday fifth — you have chosen a Friday, as I declare!’

‘A Thursday, surely?’ said Cytherea.

‘No: Old Christmas Day comes on a Saturday.’

The perturbed little brain had reckoned wrong. ‘Well, it must be a Friday,’ she murmured in a reverie.

‘No: have it altered, of course,’ said Miss Aldclyffe cheerfully. ‘There’s nothing bad in Friday, but such a creature as you will be thinking about its being unlucky — in fact, I wouldn’t choose a Friday myself to be married on, since all the other days are equally available.’

‘I shall not have it altered,’ said Cytherea firmly; ‘it has been altered once already: I shall let it be.’

XIII. THE EVENTS OF ONE DAY

1. THE FIFTH OF JANUARY. BEFORE DAWN

We pass over the intervening weeks. The time of the story is thus advanced more than a quarter of a year.

On the midnight preceding the morning which would make her the wife of a man whose presence fascinated her into involuntariness of bearing, and whom in absence she almost dreaded, Cytherea lay in her little bed, vainly endeavouring to sleep.

She had been looking back amid the years of her short though varied past, and thinking of the threshold upon which she stood. Days and months had dimmed the form of Edward Springrove like the gauzes of a vanishing stage-scene, but his dying

voice could still be heard faintly behind. That a soft small chord in her still vibrated true to his memory, she would not admit: that she did not approach Manston with feelings which could by any stretch of words be called hymeneal, she calmly owned.

‘Why do I marry him?’ she said to herself. ‘Because Owen, dear Owen my brother, wishes me to marry him. Because Mr. Manston is, and has been, uniformly kind to Owen, and to me. “Act in obedience to the dictates of common-sense,” Owen said, “and dread the sharp sting of poverty. How many thousands of women like you marry every year for the same reason, to secure a home, and mere ordinary, material comforts, which after all go far to make life endurable, even if not supremely happy.”

“Tis right, I suppose, for him to say that. O, if people only knew what a timidity and melancholy upon the subject of her future grows up in the heart of a friendless woman who is blown about like a reed shaken with the wind, as I am, they would not call this resignation of one’s self by the name of scheming to get a husband. Scheme to marry? I’d rather scheme to die! I know I am not pleasing my heart; I know that if I only were concerned, I should like risking a single future. But why should I please my useless self overmuch, when by doing otherwise I please those who are more valuable than I?’

In the midst of desultory reflections like these, which alternated with surmises as to the inexplicable connection that appeared to exist between her intended husband and Miss Aldclyffe, she heard dull noises outside the walls of the house, which she could not quite fancy to be caused by the wind. She seemed doomed to such disturbances at critical periods of her existence. ‘It is strange,’ she pondered, ‘that this my last night in Knapwater House should be disturbed precisely as my first was, no occurrence of the kind having intervened.’

As the minutes glided by the noise increased, sounding as if some one were beating the wall below her window with a bunch of switches. She would gladly have left her room and gone to stay with one of the maids, but they were without doubt all asleep.

The only person in the house likely to be awake, or who would have brains enough to comprehend her nervousness, was Miss Aldclyffe, but Cytherea never cared to go to Miss Aldclyffe’s room, though she was always welcome there, and was often almost compelled to go against her will.

The oft-repeated noise of switches grew heavier upon the wall, and was now intermingled with creaks, and a rattling like the rattling of dice. The wind blew stronger; there came first a snapping, then a crash, and some portion of the mystery was revealed. It was the breaking off and fall of a branch from one of the large trees outside. The smacking against the wall, and the intermediate rattling, ceased from that time.

Well, it was the tree which had caused the noises. The unexplained matter was that neither of the trees ever touched the walls of the house during the highest wind, and that trees could not rattle like a man playing castanets or shaking dice.

She thought, ‘Is it the intention of Fate that something connected with these noises shall influence my future as in the last case of the kind?’

During the dilemma she fell into a troubled sleep, and dreamt that she was being whipped with dry bones suspended on strings, which rattled at every blow like those of a malefactor on a gibbet; that she shifted and shrank and avoided every blow, and they fell then upon the wall to which she was tied. She could not see the face of the executioner for his mask, but his form was like Manston's.

'Thank Heaven!' she said, when she awoke and saw a faint light struggling through her blind. 'Now what were those noises?' To settle that question seemed more to her than the event of the day.

She pulled the blind aside and looked out. All was plain. The evening previous had closed in with a grey drizzle, borne upon a piercing air from the north, and now its effects were visible. The hoary drizzle still continued; but the trees and shrubs were laden with icicles to an extent such as she had never before witnessed. A shoot of the diameter of a pin's head was iced as thick as her finger; all the boughs in the park were bent almost to the earth with the immense weight of the glistening incumbrance; the walks were like a looking-glass. Many boughs had snapped beneath their burden, and lay in heaps upon the icy grass. Opposite her eye, on the nearest tree, was a fresh yellow scar, showing where the branch that had terrified her had been splintered from the trunk.

'I never could have believed it possible,' she thought, surveying the bowed-down branches, 'that trees would bend so far out of their true positions without breaking.' By watching a twig she could see a drop collect upon it from the hoary fog, sink to the lowest point, and there become coagulated as the others had done.

'Or that I could so exactly have imitated them,' she continued. 'On this morning I am to be married — unless this is a scheme of the great Mother to hinder a union of which she does not approve. Is it possible for my wedding to take place in the face of such weather as this?'

2. MORNING

Her brother Owen was staying with Manston at the Old House. Contrary to the opinion of the doctors, the wound had healed after the first surgical operation, and his leg was gradually acquiring strength, though he could only as yet get about on crutches, or ride, or be dragged in a chair.

Miss Aldclyffe had arranged that Cytherea should be married from Knapwater House, and not from her brother's lodgings at Budmouth, which was Cytherea's first idea. Owen, too, seemed to prefer the plan. The capricious old maid had latterly taken to the contemplation of the wedding with even greater warmth than had at first inspired her, and appeared determined to do everything in her power, consistent with her dignity, to render the adjuncts of the ceremony pleasing and complete.

But the weather seemed in flat contradiction of the whole proceeding. At eight o'clock the coachman crept up to the House almost upon his hands and knees, entered the kitchen, and stood with his back to the fire, panting from his exertions in pedestrianism.

The kitchen was by far the pleasantest apartment in Knapwater House on such a morning as this. The vast fire was the centre of the whole system, like a sun, and threw its warm rays upon the figures of the domestics, wheeling about it in true planetary style. A nervously-feeble imitation of its flicker was continually attempted by a family of polished metallic utensils standing in rows and groups against the walls opposite, the whole collection of shines nearly annihilating the weak daylight from outside. A step further in, and the nostrils were greeted by the scent of green herbs just gathered, and the eye by the plump form of the cook, wholesome, white-aproned, and floury — looking as edible as the food she manipulated — her movements being supported and assisted by her satellites, the kitchen and scullery maids. Minute recurrent sounds prevailed — the click of the smoke-jack, the flap of the flames, and the light touches of the women's slippers upon the stone floor.

The coachman hemmed, spread his feet more firmly upon the hearthstone, and looked hard at a small plate in the extreme corner of the dresser.

'No wedden this mornen — that's my opinion. In fact, there can't be,' he said abruptly, as if the words were the mere torso of a many-membered thought that had existed complete in his head.

The kitchen-maid was toasting a slice of bread at the end of a very long toasting-fork, which she held at arm's length towards the unapproachable fire, travestyng the Flanconnade in fencing.

'Bad out of doors, isn't it?' she said, with a look of commiseration for things in general.

'Bad? Not even a liven soul, gentle or simple, can stand on level ground. As to getten up hill to the church, 'tis perfect lunacy. And I speak of foot-passengers. As to horses and carriage, 'tis murder to think of 'em. I am going to send straight as a line into the breakfast-room, and say 'tis a closer... Hullo — here's Clerk Crickett and John Day a-comen! Now just look at 'em and picture a wedden if you can.'

All eyes were turned to the window, from which the clerk and gardener were seen crossing the court, bowed and stooping like Bel and Nebo.

'You'll have to go if it breaks all the horses' legs in the county,' said the cook, turning from the spectacle, knocking open the oven-door with the tongs, glancing critically in, and slamming it together with a clang.

'O, O; why shall I?' asked the coachman, including in his auditory by a glance the clerk and gardener who had just entered.

'Because Mr. Manston is in the business. Did you ever know him to give up for weather of any kind, or for any other mortal thing in heaven or earth?'

' — — Mornen so's — such as it is!' interrupted Mr. Crickett cheerily, coming forward to the blaze and warming one hand without looking at the fire. 'Mr. Manston gie up for anything in heaven or earth, did you say? You might ha' cut it short by sayen "to Miss Aldclyffe," and leaven out heaven and earth as trifles. But it might be put off; putten off a thing isn't getten rid of a thing, if that thing is a woman. O no, no!'

The coachman and gardener now naturally subsided into secondaries. The cook went on rather sharply, as she dribbled milk into the exact centre of a little crater of flour in a platter —

‘It might be in this case; she’s so indifferent.’

‘Dang my old sides! and so it might be. I have a bit of news — I thought there was something upon my tongue; but ‘tis a secret; not a word, mind, not a word. Why, Miss Hinton took a holiday yesterday.’

‘Yes?’ inquired the cook, looking up with perplexed curiosity.

‘D’ye think that’s all?’

‘Don’t be so three-cunning — if it is all, deliver you from the evil of raising a woman’s expectations wrongfully; I’ll skimmer your pate as sure as you cry Amen!’

‘Well, it isn’t all. When I got home last night my wife said, “Miss Adelaide took a holiday this mornen,” says she (my wife, that is); “walked over to Nether Mynton, met the comen man, and got married!” says she.’

‘Got married! what, Lord-a-mercy, did Springrove come?’

‘Springrove, no — no — Springrove’s nothen to do wi’ it — ‘twas Farmer Bollens. They’ve been playing bo-peep for these two or three months seemingly. Whilst Master Teddy Springrove has been daddlen, and hawken, and spetten about having her, she’s quietly left him all forsook. Serve him right. I don’t blame the little woman a bit.’

‘Farmer Bollens is old enough to be her father!’

‘Ay, quite; and rich enough to be ten fathers. They say he’s so rich that he has business in every bank, and measures his money in half-pint cups.’

‘Lord, I wish it was me, don’t I wish ‘twas me!’ said the scullery-maid.

‘Yes, ‘twas as neat a bit of stitching as ever I heard of,’ continued the clerk, with a fixed eye, as if he were watching the process from a distance. ‘Not a soul knew anything about it, and my wife is the only one in our parish who knows it yet. Miss Hinton came back from the wedden, went to Mr. Manston, puffed herself out large, and said she was Mrs. Bollens, but that if he wished, she had no objection to keep on the house till the regular time of giving notice had expired, or till he could get another tenant.’

‘Just like her independence,’ said the cook.

‘Well, independent or no, she’s Mrs. Bollens now. Ah, I shall never forget once when I went by Farmer Bollens’s garden — years ago now — years, when he was taking up ashleaf taties. A merry feller I was at that time, a very merry feller — for ‘twas before I took holy orders, and it didn’t prick my conscience as ‘twould now. “Farmer,” says I, “little taties seem to turn out small this year, don’t em?” “O no, Crickett,” says he, “some be fair-sized.” He’s a dull man — Farmer Bollens is — he always was. However, that’s neither here nor there; he’s a-married to a sharp woman, and if I don’t make a mistake she’ll bring him a pretty good family, gie her time.’

‘Well, it don’t matter; there’s a Providence in it,’ said the scullery-maid. ‘God A’mighty always sends bread as well as children.’

‘But ‘tis the bread to one house and the children to another very often. However, I think I can see my lady Hinton’s reason for chosen yesterday to sickness-or-health-it.

Your young miss, and that one, had crossed one another's path in regard to young Master Springrove; and I expect that when Addy Hinton found Miss Graye wasn't caren to have en, she thought she'd be beforehand with her old enemy in marrying somebody else too. That's maids' logic all over, and maids' malice likewise.'

Women who are bad enough to divide against themselves under a man's partiality are good enough to instantly unite in a common cause against his attack. 'I'll just tell you one thing then,' said the cook, shaking out her words to the time of a whisk she was beating eggs with. 'Whatever maids' logic is and maids' malice too, if Cytherea Graye even now knows that young Springrove is free again, she'll fling over the steward as soon as look at him.'

'No, no: not now,' the coachman broke in like a moderator. 'There's honour in that maid, if ever there was in one. No Miss Hinton's tricks in her. She'll stick to Manston.' 'Pifh!'

'Don't let a word be said till the wedden is over, for Heaven's sake,' the clerk continued. 'Miss Aldclyffe would fairly hang and quarter me, if my news broke off that there wedden at a last minute like this.'

'Then you had better get your wife to bolt you in the closet for an hour or two, for you'll chatter it yourself to the whole boiling parish if she don't! 'Tis a poor womanly feller!'

'You shouldn't ha' begun it, clerk. I knew how 'twould be,' said the gardener soothingly, in a whisper to the clerk's mangled remains.

The clerk turned and smiled at the fire, and warmed his other hand.

3. NOON

The weather gave way. In half-an-hour there began a rapid thaw. By ten o'clock the roads, though still dangerous, were practicable to the extent of the half-mile required by the people of Knapwater Park. One mass of heavy leaden cloud spread over the whole sky; the air began to feel damp and mild out of doors, though still cold and frosty within.

They reached the church and passed up the nave, the deep-coloured glass of the narrow windows rendering the gloom of the morning almost night itself inside the building. Then the ceremony began. The only warmth or spirit imported into it came from the bridegroom, who retained a vigorous — even Spenserian — bridal-mood throughout the morning.

Cytherea was as firm as he at this critical moment, but as cold as the air surrounding her. The few persons forming the wedding-party were constrained in movement and tone, and from the nave of the church came occasional coughs, emitted by those who, in spite of the weather, had assembled to see the termination of Cytherea's existence as a single woman. Many poor people loved her. They pitied her success, why, they could not tell, except that it was because she seemed to stand more like a statue than Cytherea Graye.

Yet she was prettily and carefully dressed; a strange contradiction in a man's idea of things — a saddening, perplexing contradiction. Are there any points in which a

difference of sex amounts to a difference of nature? Then this is surely one. Not so much, as it is commonly put, in regard to the amount of consideration given, but in the conception of the thing considered. A man emasculated by coxcombry may spend more time upon the arrangement of his clothes than any woman, but even then there is no fetichism in his idea of them — they are still only a covering he uses for a time. But here was Cytherea, in the bottom of her heart almost indifferent to life, yet possessing an instinct with which her heart had nothing to do, the instinct to be particularly regardful of those sorry trifles, her robe, her flowers, her veil, and her gloves.

The irrevocable words were soon spoken — the indelible writing soon written — and they came out of the vestry. Candles had been necessary here to enable them to sign their names, and on their return to the church the light from the candles streamed from the small open door, and across the chancel to a black chestnut screen on the south side, dividing it from a small chapel or chantry, erected for the soul's peace of some Aldclyffe of the past. Through the open-work of this screen could now be seen illuminated, inside the chantry, the reclining figures of cross-legged knights, damp and green with age, and above them a huge classic monument, also inscribed to the Aldclyffe family, heavily sculptured in cadaverous marble.

Leaning here — almost hanging to the monument — was Edward Springrove, or his spirit.

The weak daylight would never have revealed him, shaded as he was by the screen; but the unexpected rays of candle-light in the front showed him forth in startling relief to any and all of those whose eyes wandered in that direction. The sight was a sad one — sad beyond all description. His eyes were wild, their orbits leaden. His face was of a sickly paleness, his hair dry and disordered, his lips parted as if he could get no breath. His figure was spectre-thin. His actions seemed beyond his own control.

Manston did not see him; Cytherea did. The healing effect upon her heart of a year's silence — a year and a half's separation — was undone in an instant. One of those strange revivals of passion by mere sight — commoner in women than in men, and in oppressed women commonest of all — had taken place in her — so transcendently, that even to herself it seemed more like a new creation than a revival.

Marrying for a home — what a mockery it was!

It may be said that the means most potent for rekindling old love in a maiden's heart are, to see her lover in laughter and good spirits in her despite when the breach has been owing to a slight from herself; when owing to a slight from him, to see him suffering for his own fault. If he is happy in a clear conscience, she blames him; if he is miserable because deeply to blame, she blames herself. The latter was Cytherea's case now.

First, an agony of face told of the suppressed misery within her, which presently could be suppressed no longer. When they were coming out of the porch, there broke from her in a low plaintive scream the words, 'He's dying — dying! O God, save us!' She began to sink down, and would have fallen had not Manston caught her. The chief bridesmaid applied her vinaigrette.

‘What did she say?’ inquired Manston.

Owen was the only one to whom the words were intelligible, and he was far too deeply impressed, or rather alarmed, to reply. She did not faint, and soon began to recover her self-command. Owen took advantage of the hindrance to step back to where the apparition had been seen. He was enraged with Springrove for what he considered an unwarrantable intrusion.

But Edward was not in the chantry. As he had come, so he had gone, nobody could tell how or whither.

4. AFTERNOON

It might almost have been believed that a transmutation had taken place in Cytherea’s idiosyncrasy, that her moral nature had fled.

The wedding-party returned to the house. As soon as he could find an opportunity, Owen took his sister aside to speak privately with her on what had happened. The expression of her face was hard, wild, and unreal — an expression he had never seen there before, and it disturbed him. He spoke to her severely and sadly.

‘Cytherea,’ he said, ‘I know the cause of this emotion of yours. But remember this, there was no excuse for it. You should have been woman enough to control yourself. Remember whose wife you are, and don’t think anything more of a mean-spirited fellow like Springrove; he had no business to come there as he did. You are altogether wrong, Cytherea, and I am vexed with you more than I can say — very vexed.’

‘Say ashamed of me at once,’ she bitterly answered.

‘I am ashamed of you,’ he retorted angrily; ‘the mood has not left you yet, then?’

‘Owen,’ she said, and paused. Her lip trembled; her eye told of sensations too deep for tears. ‘No, Owen, it has not left me; and I will be honest. I own now to you, without any disguise of words, what last night I did not own to myself, because I hardly knew of it. I love Edward Springrove with all my strength, and heart, and soul. You call me a wanton for it, don’t you? I don’t care; I have gone beyond caring for anything!’ She looked stonily into his face and made the speech calmly.

‘Well, poor Cytherea, don’t talk like that!’ he said, alarmed at her manner.

‘I thought that I did not love him at all,’ she went on hysterically. ‘A year and a half had passed since we met. I could go by the gate of his garden without thinking of him — look at his seat in church and not care. But I saw him this morning — dying because he loves me so — I know it is that! Can I help loving him too? No, I cannot, and I will love him, and I don’t care! We have been separated somehow by some contrivance — I know we have. O, if I could only die!’

He held her in his arms. ‘Many a woman has gone to ruin herself,’ he said, ‘and brought those who love her into disgrace, by acting upon such impulses as possess you now. I have a reputation to lose as well as you. It seems that do what I will by way of remedying the stains which fell upon us, it is all doomed to be undone again.’ His voice grew husky as he made the reply.

The right and only effective chord had been touched. Since she had seen Edward, she had thought only of herself and him. Owen — her name — position — future — had been as if they did not exist.

‘I won’t give way and become a disgrace to you, at any rate,’ she said.

‘Besides, your duty to society, and those about you, requires that you should live with (at any rate) all the appearance of a good wife, and try to love your husband.’

‘Yes — my duty to society,’ she murmured. ‘But ah, Owen, it is difficult to adjust our outer and inner life with perfect honesty to all! Though it may be right to care more for the benefit of the many than for the indulgence of your own single self, when you consider that the many, and duty to them, only exist to you through your own existence, what can be said? What do our own acquaintances care about us? Not much. I think of mine. Mine will now (do they learn all the wicked frailty of my heart in this affair) look at me, smile sickly, and condemn me. And perhaps, far in time to come, when I am dead and gone, some other’s accent, or some other’s song, or thought, like an old one of mine, will carry them back to what I used to say, and hurt their hearts a little that they blamed me so soon. And they will pause just for an instant, and give a sigh to me, and think, “Poor girl!” believing they do great justice to my memory by this. But they will never, never realise that it was my single opportunity of existence, as well as of doing my duty, which they are regarding; they will not feel that what to them is but a thought, easily held in those two words of pity, “Poor girl!” was a whole life to me; as full of hours, minutes, and peculiar minutes, of hopes and dreads, smiles, whisperings, tears, as theirs: that it was my world, what is to them their world, and they in that life of mine, however much I cared for them, only as the thought I seem to them to be. Nobody can enter into another’s nature truly, that’s what is so grievous.’

‘Well, it cannot be helped,’ said Owen.

‘But we must not stay here,’ she continued, starting up and going. ‘We shall be missed. I’ll do my best, Owen — I will, indeed.’

It had been decided that on account of the wretched state of the roads, the newly-married pair should not drive to the station till the latest hour in the afternoon at which they could get a train to take them to Southampton (their destination that night) by a reasonable time in the evening. They intended the next morning to cross to Havre, and thence to Paris — a place Cytherea had never visited — for their wedding tour.

The afternoon drew on. The packing was done. Cytherea was so restless that she could stay still nowhere. Miss Aldclyffe, who, though she took little part in the day’s proceedings, was, as it were, instinctively conscious of all their movements, put down her charge’s agitation for once as the natural result of the novel event, and Manston himself was as indulgent as could be wished.

At length Cytherea wandered alone into the conservatory. When in it, she thought she would run across to the hot-house in the outer garden, having in her heart a whimsical desire that she should also like to take a last look at the familiar flowers and luxuriant leaves collected there. She pulled on a pair of overshoes, and thither she went.

Not a soul was in or around the place. The gardener was making merry on Manston's and her account.

The happiness that a generous spirit derives from the belief that it exists in others is often greater than the primary happiness itself. The gardener thought 'How happy they are!' and the thought made him happier than they.

Coming out of the forcing-house again, she was on the point of returning indoors, when a feeling that these moments of solitude would be her last of freedom induced her to prolong them a little, and she stood still, unheeding the wintry aspect of the curly-leaved plants, the straw-covered beds, and the bare fruit-trees around her. The garden, no part of which was visible from the house, sloped down to a narrow river at the foot, dividing it from the meadows without.

A man was lingering along the public path on the other side of the river; she fancied she knew the form. Her resolutions, taken in the presence of Owen, did not fail her now. She hoped and prayed that it might not be one who had stolen her heart away, and still kept it. Why should he have reappeared at all, when he had declared that he went out of her sight for ever?

She hastily hid herself, in the lowest corner of the garden close to the river. A large dead tree, thickly robed in ivy, had been considerably depressed by its icy load of the morning, and hung low over the stream, which here ran slow and deep. The tree screened her from the eyes of any passer on the other side.

She waited timidly, and her timidity increased. She would not allow herself to see him — she would hear him pass, and then look to see if it had been Edward.

But, before she heard anything, she became aware of an object reflected in the water from under the tree which hung over the river in such a way that, though hiding the actual path, and objects upon it, it permitted their reflected images to pass beneath its boughs. The reflected form was that of the man she had seen further off, but being inverted, she could not definitely characterize him.

He was looking at the upper windows of the House — at hers — was it Edward, indeed? If so, he was probably thinking he would like to say one parting word. He came closer, gazed into the stream, and walked very slowly. She was almost certain that it was Edward. She kept more safely hidden. Conscience told her that she ought not to see him. But she suddenly asked herself a question: 'Can it be possible that he sees my reflected image, as I see his? Of course he does!'

He was looking at her in the water.

She could not help herself now. She stepped forward just as he emerged from the other side of the tree and appeared erect before her. It was Edward Springrove — till the inverted vision met his eye, dreaming no more of seeing his Cytherea there than of seeing the dead themselves.

'Cytherea!'

'Mr. Springrove,' she returned, in a low voice, across the stream.

He was the first to speak again.

‘Since we have met, I want to tell you something, before we become quite as strangers to each other.’

‘No — not now — I did not mean to speak — it is not right, Edward.’ She spoke hurriedly and turned away from him, beating the air with her hand.

‘Not one common word of explanation?’ he implored. ‘Don’t think I am bad enough to try to lead you astray. Well, go — it is better.’

Their eyes met again. She was nearly choked. O, how she longed — and dreaded — to hear his explanation!

‘What is it?’ she said desperately.

‘It is that I did not come to the church this morning in order to distress you: I did not, Cytherea. It was to try to speak to you before you were — married.’

He stepped closer, and went on, ‘You know what has taken place? Surely you do? — my cousin is married, and I am free.’

‘Married — and not to you?’ Cytherea faltered, in a weak whisper.

‘Yes, she was married yesterday! A rich man had appeared, and she jilted me. She said she never would have jilted a stranger, but that by jilting me, she only exercised the right everybody has of snubbing their own relations. But that’s nothing now. I came to you to ask once more if... But I was too late.’

‘But, Edward, what’s that, what’s that!’ she cried, in an agony of reproach. ‘Why did you leave me to return to her? Why did you write me that cruel, cruel letter that nearly killed me!’

‘Cytherea! Why, you had grown to love — like — Mr. Manston, and how could you be anything to me — or care for me? Surely I acted naturally?’

‘O no — never! I loved you — only you — not him — always you! — till lately... I try to love him now.’

‘But that can’t be correct! Miss Aldclyffe told me that you wanted to hear no more of me — proved it to me!’ said Edward.

‘Never! she couldn’t.’

‘She did, Cytherea. And she sent me a letter — a love-letter, you wrote to Mr. Manston.’

‘A love-letter I wrote?’

‘Yes, a love-letter — you could not meet him just then, you said you were sorry, but the emotion you had felt with him made you forgetful of realities.’

The strife of thought in the unhappy girl who listened to this distortion of her meaning could find no vent in words. And then there followed the slow revelation in return, bringing with it all the misery of an explanation which comes too late. The question whether Miss Aldclyffe were schemer or dupe was almost passed over by Cytherea, under the immediate oppressiveness of her despair in the sense that her position was irretrievable.

Not so Springrove. He saw through all the cunning half-misrepresentations — worse than downright lies — which had just been sufficient to turn the scale both with him and with her; and from the bottom of his soul he cursed the woman and man who

had brought all this agony upon him and his Love. But he could not add more misery to the future of the poor child by revealing too much. The whole scheme she should never know.

‘I was indifferent to my own future,’ Edward said, ‘and was urged to promise adherence to my engagement with my cousin Adelaide by Miss Aldclyffe: now you are married I cannot tell you how, but it was on account of my father. Being forbidden to think of you, what did I care about anything? My new thought that you still loved me was first raised by what my father said in the letter announcing my cousin’s marriage. He said that although you were to be married on Old Christmas Day — that is to-morrow — he had noticed your appearance with pity: he thought you loved me still. It was enough for me — I came down by the earliest morning train, thinking I could see you some time to-day, the day, as I thought, before your marriage, hoping, but hardly daring to hope, that you might be induced to marry me. I hurried from the station; when I reached the village I saw idlers about the church, and the private gate leading to the House open. I ran into the church by the small door and saw you come out of the vestry; I was too late. I have now told you. I was compelled to tell you. O, my lost darling, now I shall live content — or die content!’

‘I am to blame, Edward, I am,’ she said mournfully; ‘I was taught to dread pauperism; my nights were made sleepless; there was continually reiterated in my ears till I believed it —

“‘The world and its ways have a certain worth,
And to press a point where these oppose
Were a simple policy.”

‘But I will say nothing about who influenced — who persuaded. The act is mine, after all. Edward, I married to escape dependence for my bread upon the whim of Miss Aldclyffe, or others like her. It was clearly represented to me that dependence is bearable if we have another place which we can call home; but to be a dependent and to have no other spot for the heart to anchor upon — O, it is mournful and harassing!... But that without which all persuasion would have been as air, was added by my miserable conviction that you were false; that did it, that turned me! You were to be considered as nobody to me, and Mr. Manston was invariably kind. Well, the deed is done — I must abide by it. I shall never let him know that I do not love him — never. If things had only remained as they seemed to be, if you had really forgotten me and married another woman, I could have borne it better. I wish I did not know the truth as I know it now! But our life, what is it? Let us be brave, Edward, and live out our few remaining years with dignity. They will not be long. O, I hope they will not be long!... Now, good-bye, good-bye!’

‘I wish I could be near and touch you once, just once,’ said Springrove, in a voice which he vainly endeavoured to keep firm and clear.

They looked at the river, then into it; a shoal of minnows was floating over the sandy bottom, like the black dashes on miniver; though narrow, the stream was deep, and there was no bridge.

‘Cytherea, reach out your hand that I may just touch it with mine.’

She stepped to the brink and stretched out her hand and fingers towards his, but not into them. The river was too wide.

‘Never mind,’ said Cytherea, her voice broken by agitation, ‘I must be going. God bless and keep you, my Edward! God bless you!’

‘I must touch you, I must press your hand,’ he said.

They came near — nearer — nearer still — their fingers met. There was a long firm clasp, so close and still that each hand could feel the other’s pulse throbbing beside its own.

‘My Cytherea! my stolen pet lamb!’

She glanced a mute farewell from her large perturbed eyes, turned, and ran up the garden without looking back. All was over between them. The river flowed on as quietly and obtusely as ever, and the minnows gathered again in their favourite spot as if they had never been disturbed.

Nobody indoors guessed from her countenance and bearing that her heart was near to breaking with the intensity of the misery which gnawed there. At these times a woman does not faint, or weep, or scream, as she will in the moment of sudden shocks. When lanced by a mental agony of such refined and special torture that it is indescribable by men’s words, she moves among her acquaintances much as before, and contrives so to cast her actions in the old moulds that she is only considered to be rather duller than usual.

5. HALF-PAST TWO TO FIVE O’CLOCK P.M.

Owen accompanied the newly-married couple to the railway-station, and in his anxiety to see the last of his sister, left the brougham and stood upon his crutches whilst the train was starting.

When the husband and wife were about to enter the railway-carriage they saw one of the porters looking frequently and furtively at them. He was pale, and apparently very ill.

‘Look at that poor sick man,’ said Cytherea compassionately, ‘surely he ought not to be here.’

‘He’s been very queer to-day, madam, very queer,’ another porter answered. ‘He do hardly hear when he’s spoken to, and d’ seem giddy, or as if something was on his mind. He’s been like it for this month past, but nothing so bad as he is to-day.’

‘Poor thing.’

She could not resist an innate desire to do some just thing on this most deceitful and wretched day of her life. Going up to him she gave him money, and told him to send to the old manor-house for wine or whatever he wanted.

The train moved off as the trembling man was murmuring his incoherent thanks. Owen waved his hand; Cytherea smiled back to him as if it were unknown to her that she wept all the while.

Owen was driven back to the Old House. But he could not rest in the lonely place. His conscience began to reproach him for having forced on the marriage of his sister

with a little too much peremptoriness. Taking up his crutches he went out of doors and wandered about the muddy roads with no object in view save that of getting rid of time.

The clouds which had hung so low and densely during the day cleared from the west just now as the sun was setting, calling forth a weakly twitter from a few small birds. Owen crawled down the path to the waterfall, and lingered thereabout till the solitude of the place oppressed him, when he turned back and into the road to the village. He was sad; he said to himself —

‘If there is ever any meaning in those heavy feelings which are called presentiments — and I don’t believe there is — there will be in mine to-day... Poor little Cytherea!’

At that moment the last low rays of the sun touched the head and shoulders of a man who was approaching, and showed him up to Owen’s view. It was old Mr. Springrove. They had grown familiar with each other by reason of Owen’s visits to Knapwater during the past year. The farmer inquired how Owen’s foot was progressing, and was glad to see him so nimble again.

‘How is your son?’ said Owen mechanically.

‘He is at home, sitting by the fire,’ said the farmer, in a sad voice. ‘This morning he slipped indoors from God knows where, and there he sits and mopes, and thinks, and thinks, and presses his head so hard, that I can’t help feeling for him.’

‘Is he married?’ said Owen. Cytherea had feared to tell him of the interview in the garden.

‘No. I can’t quite understand how the matter rests... Ah! Edward, too, who started with such promise; that he should now have become such a careless fellow — not a month in one place. There, Mr. Graye, I know what it is mainly owing to. If it hadn’t been for that heart affair, he might have done — but the less said about him the better. I don’t know what we should have done if Miss Aldclyffe had insisted upon the conditions of the leases. Your brother-in-law, the steward, had a hand in making it light for us, I know, and I heartily thank him for it.’ He ceased speaking, and looked round at the sky.

‘Have you heard o’ what’s happened?’ he said suddenly; ‘I was just coming out to learn about it.’

‘I haven’t heard of anything.’

‘It is something very serious, though I don’t know what. All I know is what I heard a man call out bynow — that it very much concerns somebody who lives in the parish.’

It seems singular enough, even to minds who have no dim beliefs in adumbration and presentiment, that at that moment not the shadow of a thought crossed Owen’s mind that the somebody whom the matter concerned might be himself, or any belonging to him. The event about to transpire was as portentous to the woman whose welfare was more dear to him than his own, as any, short of death itself, could possibly be; and ever afterwards, when he considered the effect of the knowledge the next half-hour conveyed to his brain, even his practical good sense could not refrain from wonder that he should have walked toward the village after hearing those words of the farmer, in

so leisurely and unconcerned a way. 'How unutterably mean must my intelligence have appeared to the eye of a foreseeing God,' he frequently said in after-time. 'Columbus on the eve of his discovery of a world was not so contemptibly unaware.'

After a few additional words of common-place the farmer left him, and, as has been said, Owen proceeded slowly and indifferently towards the village.

The labouring men had just left work, and passed the park gate, which opened into the street as Owen came down towards it. They went along in a drift, earnestly talking, and were finally about to turn in at their respective doorways. But upon seeing him they looked significantly at one another, and paused. He came into the road, on that side of the village-green which was opposite the row of cottages, and turned round to the right. When Owen turned, all eyes turned; one or two men went hurriedly indoors, and afterwards appeared at the doorstep with their wives, who also contemplated him, talking as they looked. They seemed uncertain how to act in some matter.

'If they want me, surely they will call me,' he thought, wondering more and more. He could no longer doubt that he was connected with the subject of their discourse.

The first who approached him was a boy.

'What has occurred?' said Owen.

'O, a man ha' got crazy-religious, and sent for the pa'son.'

'Is that all?'

'Yes, sir. He wished he was dead, he said, and he's almost out of his mind wi' wishen it so much. That was before Mr. Raunham came.'

'Who is he?' said Owen.

'Joseph Chinney, one of the railway-porters; he used to be night-porter.'

'Ah — the man who was ill this afternoon; by the way, he was told to come to the Old House for something, but he hasn't been. But has anything else happened — anything that concerns the wedding to-day?'

'No, sir.'

Concluding that the connection which had seemed to be traced between himself and the event must in some way have arisen from Cytherea's friendliness towards the man, Owen turned about and went homewards in a much quieter frame of mind — yet scarcely satisfied with the solution. The route he had chosen led through the dairy-yard, and he opened the gate.

Five minutes before this point of time, Edward Springrove was looking over one of his father's fields at an outlying hamlet of three or four cottages some mile and a half distant. A turnpike-gate was close by the gate of the field.

The carrier to Casterbridge came up as Edward stepped into the road, and jumped down from the van to pay toll. He recognized Springrove. 'This is a pretty set-to in your place, sir,' he said. 'You don't know about it, I suppose?'

'What?' said Springrove.

The carrier paid his dues, came up to Edward, and spoke ten words in a confidential whisper: then sprang upon the shafts of his vehicle, gave a clinching nod of significance to Springrove, and rattled away.

Edward turned pale with the intelligence. His first thought was, 'Bring her home!'

The next — did Owen Graye know what had been discovered? He probably did by that time, but no risks of probability must be run by a woman he loved dearer than all the world besides. He would at any rate make perfectly sure that her brother was in possession of the knowledge, by telling it him with his own lips.

Off he ran in the direction of the old manor-house.

The path was across arable land, and was ploughed up with the rest of the field every autumn, after which it was trodden out afresh. The thaw had so loosened the soft earth, that lumps of stiff mud were lifted by his feet at every leap he took, and flung against him by his rapid motion, as it were doggedly impeding him, and increasing tenfold the customary effort of running,

But he ran on — uphill, and downhill, the same pace alike — like the shadow of a cloud. His nearest direction, too, like Owen's, was through the dairy-barton, and as Owen entered it he saw the figure of Edward rapidly descending the opposite hill, at a distance of two or three hundred yards. Owen advanced amid the cows.

The dairyman, who had hitherto been talking loudly on some absorbing subject to the maids and men milking around him, turned his face towards the head of the cow when Owen passed, and ceased speaking.

Owen approached him and said —

'A singular thing has happened, I hear. The man is not insane, I suppose?'

'Not he — he's sensible enough,' said the dairyman, and paused. He was a man noisy with his associates — stolid and taciturn with strangers.

'Is it true that he is Chinney, the railway-porter?'

'That's the man, sir.' The maids and men sitting under the cows were all attentively listening to this discourse, milking irregularly, and softly directing the jets against the sides of the pail.

Owen could contain himself no longer, much as his mind dreaded anything of the nature of ridicule. 'The people all seem to look at me, as if something seriously concerned me; is it this stupid matter, or what is it?'

'Surely, sir, you know better than anybody else if such a strange thing concerns you.'

'What strange thing?'

'Don't you know! His confessing to Parson Raunham.'

'What did he confess? Tell me.'

'If you really ha'n't heard, 'tis this. He was as usual on duty at the station on the night of the fire last year, otherwise he wouldn't ha' known it.'

'Known what? For God's sake tell, man!'

But at this instant the two opposite gates of the dairy-yard, one on the east, the other on the west side, slammed almost simultaneously.

The rector from one, Springrove from the other, came striding across the barton.

Edward was nearest, and spoke first. He said in a low voice: 'Your sister is not legally married! His first wife is still living! How it comes out I don't know!'

‘O, here you are at last, Mr. Graye, thank Heaven!’ said the rector breathlessly. ‘I have been to the Old House, and then to Miss Aldclyffe’s looking for you — something very extraordinary.’ He beckoned to Owen, afterwards included Springrove in his glance, and the three stepped aside together.

‘A porter at the station. He was a curious nervous man. He had been in a strange state all day, but he wouldn’t go home. Your sister was kind to him, it seems, this afternoon. When she and her husband had gone, he went on with his work, shifting luggage-vans. Well, he got in the way, as if he were quite lost to what was going on, and they sent him home at last. Then he wished to see me. I went directly. There was something on his mind, he said, and told it. About the time when the fire of last November twelvemonth was got under, whilst he was by himself in the porter’s room, almost asleep, somebody came to the station and tried to open the door. He went out and found the person to be the lady he had accompanied to Carriford earlier in the evening, Mrs. Manston. She asked, when would be another train to London? The first the next morning, he told her, was at a quarter-past six o’clock from Budmouth, but that it was express, and didn’t stop at Carriford Road — it didn’t stop till it got to Anglebury. “How far is it to Anglebury?” she said. He told her, and she thanked him, and went away up the line. In a short time she ran back and took out her purse. “Don’t on any account say a word in the village or anywhere that I have been here, or a single breath about me — I’m ashamed ever to have come.” He promised; she took out two sovereigns. “Swear it on the Testament in the waiting-room,” she said, “and I’ll pay you these.” He got the book, took an oath upon it, received the money, and she left him. He was off duty at half-past five. He has kept silence all through the intervening time till now, but lately the knowledge he possessed weighed heavily upon his conscience and weak mind. Yet the nearer came the wedding-day, the more he feared to tell. The actual marriage filled him with remorse. He says your sister’s kindness afterwards was like a knife going through his heart. He thought he had ruined her.’

‘But whatever can be done? Why didn’t he speak sooner?’ cried Owen.

‘He actually called at my house twice yesterday,’ the rector continued, ‘resolved, it seems, to unburden his mind. I was out both times — he left no message, and, they say, he looked relieved that his object was defeated. Then he says he resolved to come to you at the Old House last night — started, reached the door, and dreaded to knock — and then went home again.’

‘Here will be a tale for the newsmongers of the county,’ said Owen bitterly. ‘The idea of his not opening his mouth sooner — the criminality of the thing!’

‘Ah, that’s the inconsistency of a weak nature. But now that it is put to us in this way, how much more probable it seems that she should have escaped than have been burnt — ’

‘You will, of course, go straight to Mr. Manston, and ask him what it all means?’ Edward interrupted.

‘Of course I shall! Manston has no right to carry off my sister unless he’s her husband,’ said Owen. ‘I shall go and separate them.’

‘Certainly you will,’ said the rector.

‘Where’s the man?’

‘In his cottage.’

‘‘Tis no use going to him, either. I must go off at once and overtake them — lay the case before Manston, and ask him for additional and certain proofs of his first wife’s death. An up-train passes soon, I think.’

‘Where have they gone?’ said Edward.

‘To Paris — as far as Southampton this afternoon, to proceed to-morrow morning.’

‘Where in Southampton?’

‘I really don’t know — some hotel. I only have their Paris address. But I shall find them by making a few inquiries.’

The rector had in the meantime been taking out his pocket-book, and now opened it at the first page, whereon it was his custom every month to gum a small railway time-table — cut from the local newspaper.

‘The afternoon express is just gone,’ he said, holding open the page, ‘and the next train to Southampton passes at ten minutes to six o’clock. Now it wants — let me see — five-and-forty minutes to that time. Mr. Graye, my advice is that you come with me to the porter’s cottage, where I will shortly write out the substance of what he has said, and get him to sign it. You will then have far better grounds for interfering between Mr. and Mrs. Manston than if you went to them with a mere hearsay story.’

The suggestion seemed a good one. ‘Yes, there will be time before the train starts,’ said Owen.

Edward had been musing restlessly.

‘Let me go to Southampton in your place, on account of your lameness?’ he said suddenly to Graye.

‘I am much obliged to you, but I think I can scarcely accept the offer,’ returned Owen coldly. ‘Mr. Manston is an honourable man, and I had much better see him myself.’

‘There is no doubt,’ said Mr. Raunham, ‘that the death of his wife was fully believed in by himself.’

‘None whatever,’ said Owen; ‘and the news must be broken to him, and the question of other proofs asked, in a friendly way. It would not do for Mr. Springrove to appear in the case at all.’ He still spoke rather coldly; the recollection of the attachment between his sister and Edward was not a pleasant one to him.

‘You will never find them,’ said Edward. ‘You have never been to Southampton, and I know every house there.’

‘That makes little difference,’ said the rector; ‘he will have a cab. Certainly Mr. Graye is the proper man to go on the errand.’

‘Stay; I’ll telegraph to ask them to meet me when I arrive at the terminus,’ said Owen; ‘that is, if their train has not already arrived.’

Mr. Raunham pulled out his pocket-book again. ‘The two-thirty train reached Southampton a quarter of an hour ago,’ he said.

It was too late to catch them at the station. Nevertheless, the rector suggested that it would be worth while to direct a message to 'all the respectable hotels in Southampton,' on the chance of its finding them, and thus saving a deal of personal labour to Owen in searching about the place.

'I'll go and telegraph, whilst you return to the man,' said Edward — an offer which was accepted. Graye and the rector then turned off in the direction of the porter's cottage.

Edward, to despatch the message at once, hurriedly followed the road towards the station, still restlessly thinking. All Owen's proceedings were based on the assumption, natural under the circumstances, of Manston's good faith, and that he would readily acquiesce in any arrangement which should clear up the mystery. 'But,' thought Edward, 'suppose — and Heaven forgive me, I cannot help supposing it — that Manston is not that honourable man, what will a young and inexperienced fellow like Owen do? Will he not be hoodwinked by some specious story or another, framed to last till Manston gets tired of poor Cytherea? And then the disclosure of the truth will ruin and blacken both their futures irremediably.'

However, he proceeded to execute his commission. This he put in the form of a simple request from Owen to Manston, that Manston would come to the Southampton platform, and wait for Owen's arrival, as he valued his reputation. The message was directed as the rector had suggested, Edward guaranteeing to the clerk who sent it off that every expense connected with the search would be paid.

No sooner had the telegram been despatched than his heart sank within him at the want of foresight shown in sending it. Had Manston, all the time, a knowledge that his first wife lived, the telegram would be a forewarning which might enable him to defeat Owen still more signally.

Whilst the machine was still giving off its multitudinous series of raps, Edward heard a powerful rush under the shed outside, followed by a long sonorous creak. It was a train of some sort, stealing softly into the station, and it was an up-train. There was the ring of a bell. It was certainly a passenger train.

Yet the booking-office window was closed.

'Ho, ho, John, seventeen minutes after time and only three stations up the line. The incline again?' The voice was the stationmaster's, and the reply seemed to come from the guard.

'Yes, the other side of the cutting. The thaw has made it all in a perfect cloud of fog, and the rails are as slippery as glass. We had to bring them through the cutting at twice.'

'Anybody else for the four-forty-five express?' the voice continued. The few passengers, having crossed over to the other side long before this time, had taken their places at once.

A conviction suddenly broke in upon Edward's mind; then a wish overwhelmed him. The conviction — as startling as it was sudden — was that Manston was a villain, who at some earlier time had discovered that his wife lived, and had bribed her to keep out

of sight, that he might possess Cytherea. The wish was — to proceed at once by this very train that was starting, find Manston before he would expect from the words of the telegram (if he got it) that anybody from Carriford could be with him — charge him boldly with the crime, and trust to his consequent confusion (if he were guilty) for a solution of the extraordinary riddle, and the release of Cytherea!

The ticket-office had been locked up at the expiration of the time at which the train was due. Rushing out as the guard blew his whistle, Edward opened the door of a carriage and leapt in. The train moved along, and he was soon out of sight.

Springrove had long since passed that peculiar line which lies across the course of falling in love — if, indeed, it may not be called the initial itself of the complete passion — a longing to cherish; when the woman is shifted in a man's mind from the region of mere admiration to the region of warm fellowship. At this assumption of her nature, she changes to him in tone, hue, and expression. All about the loved one that said 'She' before, says 'We' now. Eyes that were to be subdued become eyes to be feared for: a brain that was to be probed by cynicism becomes a brain that is to be tenderly assisted; feet that were to be tested in the dance become feet that are not to be distressed; the once-criticized accent, manner, and dress, become the clients of a special pleader.

6. FIVE TO EIGHT O'CLOCK P.M.

Now that he was fairly on the track, and had begun to cool down, Edward remembered that he had nothing to show — no legal authority whatever to question Manston or interfere between him and Cytherea as husband and wife. He now saw the wisdom of the rector in obtaining a signed confession from the porter. The document would not be a death-bed confession — perhaps not worth anything legally — but it would be held by Owen; and he alone, as Cytherea's natural guardian, could separate them on the mere ground of an unproved probability, or what might perhaps be called the hallucination of an idiot. Edward himself, however, was as firmly convinced as the rector had been of the truth of the man's story, and paced backward and forward the solitary compartment as the train wound through the dark heathery plains, the mazy woods, and moaning coppices, as resolved as ever to pounce on Manston, and charge him with the crime during the critical interval between the reception of the telegram and the hour at which Owen's train would arrive — trusting to circumstances for what he should say and do afterwards, but making up his mind to be a ready second to Owen in any emergency that might arise.

At thirty-three minutes past seven he stood on the platform of the station at Southampton — a clear hour before the train containing Owen could possibly arrive.

Making a few inquiries here, but too impatient to pursue his investigation carefully and inductively, he went into the town.

At the expiration of another half-hour he had visited seven hotels and inns, large and small, asking the same questions at each, and always receiving the same reply — nobody of that name, or answering to that description, had been there. A boy from the telegraph-office had called, asking for the same persons, if they recollected rightly.

He reflected awhile, struck again by a painful thought that they might possibly have decided to cross the Channel by the night-boat. Then he hastened off to another quarter of the town to pursue his inquiries among hotels of the more old-fashioned and quiet class. His stained and weary appearance obtained for him but a modicum of civility, wherever he went, which made his task yet more difficult. He called at three several houses in this neighbourhood, with the same result as before. He entered the door of the fourth house whilst the clock of the nearest church was striking eight.

‘Have a tall gentleman named Manston, and a young wife arrived here this evening?’ he asked again, in words which had grown odd to his ears from very familiarity.

‘A new-married couple, did you say?’

‘They are, though I didn’t say so.’

‘They have taken a sitting-room and bedroom, number thirteen.’

‘Are they indoors?’

‘I don’t know. Eliza!’

‘Yes, m’m.’

‘See if number thirteen is in — that gentleman and his wife.’

‘Yes, m’m.’

‘Has any telegram come for them?’ said Edward, when the maid had gone on her errand.

‘No — nothing that I know of.’

‘Somebody did come and ask if a Mr. and Mrs. Masters, or some such name, were here this evening,’ said another voice from the back of the bar-parlour.

‘And did they get the message?’

‘Of course they did not — they were not here — they didn’t come till half-an-hour after that. The man who made inquiries left no message. I told them when they came that they, or a name something like theirs, had been asked for, but they didn’t seem to understand why it should be, and so the matter dropped.’

The chambermaid came back. ‘The gentleman is not in, but the lady is. Who shall I say?’

‘Nobody,’ said Edward. For it now became necessary to reflect upon his method of proceeding. His object in finding their whereabouts — apart from the wish to assist Owen — had been to see Manston, ask him flatly for an explanation, and confirm the request of the message in the presence of Cytherea — so as to prevent the possibility of the steward’s palming off a story upon Cytherea, or eluding her brother when he came. But here were two important modifications of the expected condition of affairs. The telegram had not been received, and Cytherea was in the house alone.

He hesitated as to the propriety of intruding upon her in Manston’s absence. Besides, the women at the bottom of the stairs would see him — his intrusion would seem odd — and Manston might return at any moment. He certainly might call, and wait for Manston with the accusation upon his tongue, as he had intended. But it was a doubtful course. That idea had been based upon the assumption that Cytherea was not married. If the first wife were really dead after all — and he felt sick at the thought —

Cytherea as the steward's wife might in after-years — perhaps, at once — be subjected to indignity and cruelty on account of an old lover's interference now.

Yes, perhaps the announcement would come most properly and safely for her from her brother Owen, the time of whose arrival had almost expired.

But, on turning round, he saw that the staircase and passage were quite deserted. He and his errand had as completely died from the minds of the attendants as if they had never been. There was absolutely nothing between him and Cytherea's presence. Reason was powerless now; he must see her — right or wrong, fair or unfair to Manston — offensive to her brother or no. His lips must be the first to tell the alarming story to her. Who loved her as he! He went back lightly through the hall, up the stairs, two at a time, and followed the corridor till he came to the door numbered thirteen.

He knocked softly: nobody answered.

There was no time to lose if he would speak to Cytherea before Manston came. He turned the handle of the door and looked in. The lamp on the table burned low, and showed writing materials open beside it; the chief light came from the fire, the direct rays of which were obscured by a sweet familiar outline of head and shoulders — still as precious to him as ever.

7. A QUARTER-PAST EIGHT O'CLOCK P.M.

There is an attitude — approximatively called pensive — in which the soul of a human being, and especially of a woman, dominates outwardly and expresses its presence so strongly, that the intangible essence seems more apparent than the body itself. This was Cytherea's expression now. What old days and sunny eves at Budmouth Bay was she picturing? Her reverie had caused her not to notice his knock.

'Cytherea!' he said softly.

She let drop her hand, and turned her head, evidently thinking that her visitor could be no other than Manston, yet puzzled at the voice.

There was no preface on Springrove's tongue; he forgot his position — hers — that he had come to ask quietly if Manston had other proofs of being a widower — everything — and jumped to a conclusion.

'You are not his wife, Cytherea — come away, he has a wife living!' he cried in an agitated whisper. 'Owen will be here directly.'

She started up, recognized the tidings first, the bearer of them afterwards. 'Not his wife? O, what is it — what — who is living?' She awoke by degrees. 'What must I do? Edward, it is you! Why did you come? Where is Owen?'

'What has Manston shown you in proof of the death of his other wife? Tell me quick.'

'Nothing — we have never spoken of the subject. Where is my brother Owen? I want him, I want him!'

'He is coming by-and-by. Come to the station to meet him — do,' implored Springrove. 'If Mr. Manston comes, he will keep you from me: I am nobody,' he added bitterly, feeling the reproach her words had faintly shadowed forth.

‘Mr. Manston is only gone out to post a letter he has just written,’ she said, and without being distinctly cognizant of the action, she wildly looked for her bonnet and cloak, and began putting them on, but in the act of fastening them uttered a spasmodic cry.

‘No, I’ll not go out with you,’ she said, flinging the articles down again. Running to the door she flitted along the passage, and downstairs.

‘Give me a private room — quite private,’ she said breathlessly to some one below.

‘Number twelve is a single room, madam, and unoccupied,’ said some tongue in astonishment.

Without waiting for any person to show her into it, Cytherea hurried upstairs again, brushed through the corridor, entered the room specified, and closed the door. Edward heard her sob out —

‘Nobody but Owen shall speak to me — nobody!’

‘He will be here directly,’ said Springrove, close against the panel, and then went towards the stairs. He had seen her; it was enough.

He descended, stepped into the street, and hastened to meet Owen at the railway-station.

As for the poor maiden who had received the news, she knew not what to think. She listened till the echo of Edward’s footsteps had died away, then bowed her face upon the bed. Her sudden impulse had been to escape from sight. Her weariness after the unwonted strain, mental and bodily, which had been put upon her by the scenes she had passed through during the long day, rendered her much more timid and shaken by her position than she would naturally have been. She thought and thought of that single fact which had been told her — that the first Mrs. Manston was still living — till her brain seemed ready to burst its confinement with excess of throbbing. It was only natural that she should, by degrees, be unable to separate the discovery, which was matter of fact, from the suspicion of treachery on her husband’s part, which was only matter of inference. And thus there arose in her a personal fear of him.

‘Suppose he should come in now and seize me!’ This at first mere frenzied supposition grew by degrees to a definite horror of his presence, and especially of his intense gaze. Thus she raised herself to a heat of excitement, which was none the less real for being vented in no cry of any kind. No; she could not meet Manston’s eye alone, she would only see him in her brother’s company.

Almost delirious with this idea, she ran and locked the door to prevent all possibility of her intentions being nullified, or a look or word being flung at her by anybody whilst she knew not what she was.

8. HALF-PAST EIGHT O’CLOCK P.M.

Then Cytherea felt her way amid the darkness of the room till she came to the head of the bed, where she searched for the bell-rope and gave it a pull. Her summons was speedily answered by the landlady herself, whose curiosity to know the meaning of these strange proceedings knew no bounds. The landlady attempted to turn the

handle of the door. Cytherea kept the door locked. 'Please tell Mr. Manston when he comes that I am ill,' she said from the inside, 'and that I cannot see him.'

'Certainly I will, madam,' said the landlady. 'Won't you have a fire?'

'No, thank you.'

'Nor a light?'

'I don't want one, thank you.'

'Nor anything?'

'Nothing.'

The landlady withdrew, thinking her visitor half insane.

Manston came in about five minutes later, and went at once up to the sitting-room, fully expecting to find his wife there. He looked round, rang, and was told the words Cytherea had said, that she was too ill to be seen.

'She is in number twelve room,' added the maid.

Manston was alarmed, and knocked at the door. 'Cytherea!'

'I am unwell, I cannot see you,' she said.

'Are you seriously ill, dearest? Surely not.'

'No, not seriously.'

'Let me come in; I will get a doctor.'

'No, he can't see me either.'

'She won't open the door, sir, not to nobody at all!' said the chambermaid, with wonder-waiting eyes.

'Hold your tongue, and be off!' said Manston with a snap.

The maid vanished.

'Come, Cytherea, this is foolish — indeed it is — not opening the door... I cannot comprehend what can be the matter with you. Nor can a doctor either, unless he sees you.'

Her voice had trembled more and more at each answer she gave, but nothing could induce her to come out and confront him. Hating scenes, Manston went back to the sitting-room, greatly irritated and perplexed.

And there Cytherea from the adjoining room could hear him pacing up and down. She thought, 'Suppose he insists upon seeing me — he probably may — and will burst open the door!' This notion increased, and she sank into a corner in a half-somnolent state, but with ears alive to the slightest sound. Reason could not overthrow the delirious fancy that outside her door stood Manston and all the people in the hotel, waiting to laugh her to scorn.

9. HALF-PAST EIGHT TO ELEVEN P.M.

In the meantime, Springrove was pacing up and down the arrival platform of the railway-station. Half-past eight o'clock — the time at which Owen's train was due — had come, and passed, but no train appeared.

'When will the eight-thirty train be in?' he asked of a man who was sweeping the mud from the steps.

'She is not expected yet this hour.'

‘How is that?’

‘Christmas-time, you see, ‘tis always so. People are running about to see their friends. The trains have been like it ever since Christmas Eve, and will be for another week yet.’

Edward again went on walking and waiting under the draughty roof. He found it utterly impossible to leave the spot. His mind was so intent upon the importance of meeting with Owen, and informing him of Cytherea’s whereabouts, that he could not but fancy Owen might leave the station unobserved if he turned his back, and become lost to him in the streets of the town.

The hour expired. Ten o’clock struck. ‘When will the train be in?’ said Edward to the telegraph clerk.

‘In five-and-thirty minutes. She’s now at L — — . They have extra passengers, and the rails are bad to-day.’

At last, at a quarter to eleven, the train came in.

The first to alight from it was Owen, looking pale and cold. He casually glanced round upon the nearly deserted platform, and was hurrying to the outlet, when his eyes fell upon Edward. At sight of his friend he was quite bewildered, and could not speak.

‘Here I am, Mr. Graye,’ said Edward cheerfully. ‘I have seen Cytherea, and she has been waiting for you these two or three hours.’

Owen took Edward’s hand, pressed it, and looked at him in silence. Such was the concentration of his mind, that not till many minutes after did he think of inquiring how Springrove had contrived to be there before him.

10. ELEVEN O’CLOCK P.M.

On their arrival at the door of the hotel, it was arranged between Springrove and Graye that the latter only should enter, Edward waiting outside. Owen had remembered continually what his friend had frequently overlooked, that there was yet a possibility of his sister being Manston’s wife, and the recollection taught him to avoid any rashness in his proceedings which might lead to bitterness hereafter.

Entering the room, he found Manston sitting in the chair which had been occupied by Cytherea on Edward’s visit, three hours earlier. Before Owen had spoken, Manston arose, and stepping past him closed the door. His face appeared harassed — much more troubled than the slight circumstance which had as yet come to his knowledge seemed to account for.

Manston could form no reason for Owen’s presence, but intuitively linked it with Cytherea’s seclusion. ‘Altogether this is most unseemly,’ he said, ‘whatever it may mean.’

‘Don’t think there is meant anything unfriendly by my coming here,’ said Owen earnestly; ‘but listen to this, and think if I could do otherwise than come.’

He took from his pocket the confession of Chinney the porter, as hastily written out by the vicar, and read it aloud. The aspects of Manston’s face whilst he listened to the opening words were strange, dark, and mysterious enough to have justified suspicions

that no deceit could be too complicated for the possessor of such impulses, had there not overridden them all, as the reading went on, a new and irrepressible expression — one unmistakably honest. It was that of unqualified amazement in the steward's mind at the news he heard. Owen looked up and saw it. The sight only confirmed him in the belief he had held throughout, in antagonism to Edward's suspicions.

There could no longer be a shadow of doubt that if the first Mrs. Manston lived, her husband was ignorant of the fact. What he could have feared by his ghastly look at first, and now have ceased to fear, it was quite futile to conjecture.

'Now I do not for a moment doubt your complete ignorance of the whole matter; you cannot suppose for an instant that I do,' said Owen when he had finished reading. 'But is it not best for both that Cytherea should come back with me till the matter is cleared up? In fact, under the circumstances, no other course is left open to me than to request it.'

Whatever Manston's original feelings had been, all in him now gave way to irritation, and irritation to rage. He paced up and down the room till he had mastered it; then said in ordinary tones —

'Certainly, I know no more than you and others know — it was a gratuitous unpleasantness in you to say you did not doubt me. Why should you, or anybody, have doubted me?'

'Well, where is my sister?' said Owen.

'Locked in the next room.'

His own answer reminded Manston that Cytherea must, by some inscrutable means, have had an inkling of the event.

Owen had gone to the door of Cytherea's room.

'Cytherea, darling — 'tis Owen,' he said, outside the door. A rustling of clothes, soft footsteps, and a voice saying from the inside, 'Is it really you, Owen, — is it really?'

'It is.'

'O, will you take care of me?'

'Always.'

She unlocked the door, and retreated again. Manston came forward from the other room with a candle in his hand, as Owen pushed open the door.

Her frightened eyes were unnaturally large, and shone like stars in the darkness of the background, as the light fell upon them. She leapt up to Owen in one bound, her small taper fingers extended like the leaves of a lupine. Then she clasped her cold and trembling hands round his neck and shivered.

The sight of her again kindled all Manston's passions into activity. 'She shall not go with you,' he said firmly, and stepping a pace or two closer, 'unless you prove that she is not my wife; and you can't do it!'

'This is proof,' said Owen, holding up the paper.

'No proof at all,' said Manston hotly. "'Tis not a death-bed confession, and those are the only things of the kind held as good evidence.'

'Send for a lawyer,' Owen returned, 'and let him tell us the proper course to adopt.'

‘Never mind the law — let me go with Owen!’ cried Cytherea, still holding on to him. ‘You will let me go with him, won’t you, sir?’ she said, turning appealingly to Manston.

‘We’ll have it all right and square,’ said Manston, with more quietness. ‘I have no objection to your brother sending for a lawyer, if he wants to.’

It was getting on for twelve o’clock, but the proprietor of the hotel had not yet gone to bed on account of the mystery on the first floor, which was an occurrence unusual in the quiet family lodging. Owen looked over the banisters, and saw him standing in the hall. It struck Graye that the wisest course would be to take the landlord to a certain extent into their confidence, appeal to his honour as a gentleman, and so on, in order to acquire the information he wanted, and also to prevent the episode of the evening from becoming a public piece of news. He called the landlord up to where they stood, and told him the main facts of the story.

The landlord was fortunately a quiet, prejudiced man, and a meditative smoker.

‘I know the very man you want to see — the very man,’ he said, looking at the general features of the candle-flame. ‘Sharp as a needle, and not over-rich. Timms will put you all straight in no time — trust Timms for that.’

‘He’s in bed by this time for certain,’ said Owen.

‘Never mind that — Timms knows me, I know him. He’ll oblige me as a personal favour. Wait here a bit. Perhaps, too, he’s up at some party or another — he’s a nice, jovial fellow, sharp as a needle, too; mind you, sharp as a needle, too.’

He went downstairs, put on his overcoat, and left the house, the three persons most concerned entering the room, and standing motionless, awkward, and silent in the midst of it. Cytherea pictured to herself the long weary minutes she would have to stand there, whilst a sleepy man could be prepared for consultation, till the constraint between them seemed unendurable to her — she could never last out the time. Owen was annoyed that Manston had not quietly arranged with him at once; Manston at Owen’s homeliness of idea in proposing to send for an attorney, as if he would be a touchstone of infallible proof.

Reflection was cut short by the approach of footsteps, and in a few moments the proprietor of the hotel entered, introducing his friend. ‘Mr. Timms has not been in bed,’ he said; ‘he had just returned from dining with a few friends, so there’s no trouble given. To save time I explained the matter as we came along.’

It occurred to Owen and Manston both that they might get a misty exposition of the law from Mr. Timms at that moment of concluding dinner with a few friends.

‘As far as I can see,’ said the lawyer, yawning, and turning his vision inward by main force, ‘it is quite a matter for private arrangement between the parties, whoever the parties are — at least at present. I speak more as a father than as a lawyer, it is true, but, let the young lady stay with her father, or guardian, safe out of shame’s way, until the mystery is sifted, whatever the mystery is. Should the evidence prove to be false, or trumped up by anybody to get her away from you, her husband, you may sue them for the damages accruing from the delay.’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Manston, who had completely recovered his self-possession and common-sense; ‘let it all be settled by herself.’ Turning to Cytherea he whispered so softly that Owen did not hear the words —

‘Do you wish to go back with your brother, dearest, and leave me here miserable, and lonely, or will you stay with me, your own husband.’

‘I’ll go back with Owen.’

‘Very well.’ He relinquished his coaxing tone, and went on sternly: ‘And remember this, Cytherea, I am as innocent of deception in this thing as you are yourself. Do you believe me?’

‘I do,’ she said.

‘I had no shadow of suspicion that my first wife lived. I don’t think she does even now. Do you believe me?’

‘I believe you,’ she said.

‘And now, good-evening,’ he continued, opening the door and politely intimating to the three men standing by that there was no further necessity for their remaining in his room. ‘In three days I shall claim her.’

The lawyer and the hotel-keeper retired first. Owen, gathering up as much of his sister’s clothing as lay about the room, took her upon his arm, and followed them. Edward, to whom she owed everything, who had been left standing in the street like a dog without a home, was utterly forgotten. Owen paid the landlord and the lawyer for the trouble he had occasioned them, looked to the packing, and went to the door.

A fly, which somewhat unaccountably was seen lingering in front of the house, was called up, and Cytherea’s luggage put upon it.

‘Do you know of any hotel near the station that is open for night arrivals?’ Owen inquired of the driver.

‘A place has been bespoke for you, sir, at the White Unicorn — and the gentleman wished me to give you this.’

‘Bespoken by Springrove, who ordered the fly, of course,’ said Owen to himself. By the light of the street-lamp he read these lines, hurriedly traced in pencil: —

‘I have gone home by the mail-train. It is better for all parties that I should be out of the way. Tell Cytherea that I apologize for having caused her such unnecessary pain, as it seems I did — but it cannot be helped now. E.S.’

Owen handed his sister into the vehicle, and told the flyman to drive on.

‘Poor Springrove — I think we have served him rather badly,’ he said to Cytherea, repeating the words of the note to her.

A thrill of pleasure passed through her bosom as she listened to them. They were the genuine reproach of a lover to his mistress; the trifling coldness of her answer to him would have been noticed by no man who was only a friend. But, in entertaining that sweet thought, she had forgotten herself, and her position for the instant.

Was she still Manston’s wife — that was the terrible supposition, and her future seemed still a possible misery to her. For, on account of the late jarring accident, a

life with Manston which would otherwise have been only a sadness, must become a burden of unutterable sorrow.

Then she thought of the misrepresentation and scandal that would ensue if she were no wife. One cause for thankfulness accompanied the reflection; Edward knew the truth.

They soon reached the quiet old inn, which had been selected for them by the forethought of the man who loved her well. Here they installed themselves for the night, arranging to go to Budmouth by the first train the next day.

At this hour Edward Springrove was fast approaching his native county on the wheels of the night-mail.

XIV. THE EVENTS OF FIVE WEEKS

1. FROM THE SIXTH TO THE THIRTEENTH OF JANUARY

Manston had evidently resolved to do nothing in a hurry.

This much was plain, that his earnest desire and intention was to raise in Cytherea's bosom no feelings of permanent aversion to him. The instant after the first burst of disappointment had escaped him in the hotel at Southampton, he had seen how far better it would be to lose her presence for a week than her respect for ever.

'She shall be mine; I will claim the young thing yet,' he insisted. And then he seemed to reason over methods for compassing that object, which, to all those who were in any degree acquainted with the recent event, appeared the least likely of possible contingencies.

He returned to Knapwater late the next day, and was preparing to call on Miss Aldclyffe, when the conclusion forced itself upon him that nothing would be gained by such a step. No; every action of his should be done openly — even religiously. At least, he called on the rector, and stated this to be his resolve.

'Certainly,' said Mr. Raunham, 'it is best to proceed candidly and fairly, or undue suspicion may fall on you. You should, in my opinion, take active steps at once.'

'I will do the utmost that lies in my power to clear up the mystery, and silence the hubbub of gossip that has been set going about me. But what can I do? They say that the man who comes first in the chain of inquiry is not to be found — I mean the porter.'

'I am sorry to say that he is not. When I returned from the station last night, after seeing Owen Graye off, I went again to the cottage where he has been lodging, to get more intelligence, as I thought. He was not there. He had gone out at dusk, saying he would be back soon. But he has not come back yet.'

'I rather doubt if we shall see him again.'

'Had I known of this, I would have done what in my flurry I did not think of doing — set a watch upon him. But why not advertise for your missing wife as a preliminary, consulting your solicitor in the meantime?'

‘Advertise. I’ll think about it,’ said Manston, lingering on the word as he pronounced it. ‘Yes, that seems a right thing — quite a right thing.’

He went home and remained moodily indoors all the next day and the next — for nearly a week, in short. Then, one evening at dusk, he went out with an uncertain air as to the direction of his walk, which resulted, however, in leading him again to the rectory.

He saw Mr. Raunham. ‘Have you done anything yet?’ the rector inquired.

‘No — I have not,’ said Manston absently. ‘But I am going to set about it.’ He hesitated, as if ashamed of some weakness he was about to betray. ‘My object in calling was to ask if you had heard any tidings from Budmouth of my — Cytherea. You used to speak of her as one you were interested in.’

There was, at any rate, real sadness in Manston’s tone now, and the rector paused to weigh his words ere he replied.

‘I have not heard directly from her,’ he said gently. ‘But her brother has communicated with some people in the parish — ’

‘The Springroves, I suppose,’ said Manston gloomily.

‘Yes; and they tell me that she is very ill, and I am sorry to say, likely to be for some days.’

‘Surely, surely, I must go and see her!’ Manston cried.

‘I would advise you not to go,’ said Raunham. ‘But do this instead — be as quick as you can in making a movement towards ascertaining the truth as regards the existence of your wife. You see, Mr. Manston, an out-step place like this is not like a city, and there is nobody to busy himself for the good of the community; whilst poor Cytherea and her brother are socially too dependent to be able to make much stir in the matter, which is a greater reason still why you should be disinterestedly prompt.’

The steward murmured an assent. Still there was the same indecision! — not the indecision of weakness — the indecision of conscious perplexity.

On Manston’s return from this interview at the rectory, he passed the door of the Rising Sun Inn. Finding he had no light for his cigar, and it being three-quarters of a mile to his residence in the park, he entered the tavern to get one. Nobody was in the outer portion of the front room where Manston stood, but a space round the fire was screened off from the remainder, and inside the high oak settle, forming a part of the screen, he heard voices conversing. The speakers had not noticed his footsteps, and continued their discourse.

One of the two he recognized as a well-known night-poacher, the man who had met him with tidings of his wife’s death on the evening of the conflagration. The other seemed to be a stranger following the same mode of life. The conversation was carried on in the emphatic and confidential tone of men who are slightly intoxicated, its subject being an unaccountable experience that one of them had had on the night of the fire.

What the steward heard was enough, and more than enough, to lead him to forget or to renounce his motive in entering. The effect upon him was strange and strong. His first object seemed to be to escape from the house again without being seen or heard.

Having accomplished this, he went in at the park gate, and strode off under the trees to the Old House. There sitting down by the fire, and burying himself in reflection, he allowed the minutes to pass by unheeded. First the candle burnt down in its socket and stunk: he did not notice it. Then the fire went out: he did not see it. His feet grew cold; still he thought on.

It may be remarked that a lady, a year and a quarter before this time, had, under the same conditions — an unrestricted mental absorption — shown nearly the same peculiarities as this man evinced now. The lady was Miss Aldclyffe.

It was half-past twelve when Manston moved, as if he had come to a determination.

The first thing he did the next morning was to call at Knapwater House; where he found that Miss Aldclyffe was not well enough to see him. She had been ailing from slight internal haemorrhage ever since the confession of the porter Chinney. Apparently not much aggrieved at the denial, he shortly afterwards went to the railway-station and took his departure for London, leaving a letter for Miss Aldclyffe, stating the reason of his journey thither — to recover traces of his missing wife.

During the remainder of the week paragraphs appeared in the local and other newspapers, drawing attention to the facts of this singular case. The writers, with scarcely an exception, dwelt forcibly upon a feature which had at first escaped the observation of the villagers, including Mr. Raunham — that if the announcement of the man Chinney were true, it seemed extremely probable that Mrs. Manston left her watch and keys behind on purpose to blind people as to her escape; and that therefore she would not now let herself be discovered, unless a strong pressure were put upon her. The writers added that the police were on the track of the porter, who very possibly had absconded in the fear that his reticence was criminal, and that Mr. Manston, the husband, was, with praiseworthy energy, making every effort to clear the whole matter up.

2. FROM THE EIGHTEENTH TO THE END OF JANUARY

Five days from the time of his departure, Manston returned from London and Liverpool, looking very fatigued and thoughtful. He explained to the rector and other of his acquaintance that all the inquiries he had made at his wife's old lodgings and his own had been totally barren of results.

But he seemed inclined to push the affair to a clear conclusion now that he had commenced. After the lapse of another day or two he proceeded to fulfil his promise to the rector, and advertised for the missing woman in three of the London papers. The advertisement was a carefully considered and even attractive effusion, calculated to win the heart, or at least the understanding, of any woman who had a spark of her own nature left in her.

There was no answer.

Three days later he repeated the experiment; with the same result as before.

'I cannot try any further,' said Manston speciously to the rector, his sole auditor throughout the proceedings. 'Mr. Raunham, I'll tell you the truth plainly: I don't love

her; I do love Cytherea, and the whole of this business of searching for the other woman goes altogether against me. I hope to God I shall never see her again.'

'But you will do your duty at least?' said Mr. Raunham.

'I have done it,' said Manston. 'If ever a man on the face of this earth has done his duty towards an absent wife, I have towards her — living or dead — at least,' he added, correcting himself, 'since I have lived at Knapwater. I neglected her before that time — I own that, as I have owned it before.'

'I should, if I were you, adopt other means to get tidings of her if advertising fails, in spite of my feelings,' said the rector emphatically. 'But at any rate, try advertising once more. There's a satisfaction in having made any attempt three several times.'

When Manston had left the study, the rector stood looking at the fire for a considerable length of time, lost in profound reflection. He went to his private diary, and after many pauses, which he varied only by dipping his pen, letting it dry, wiping it on his sleeve, and then dipping it again, he took the following note of events: —

'January 25. — Mr. Manston has just seen me for the third time on the subject of his lost wife. There have been these peculiarities attending the three interviews: —

'The first. My visitor, whilst expressing by words his great anxiety to do everything for her recovery, showed plainly by his bearing that he was convinced he should never see her again.

'The second. He had left off feigning anxiety to do rightly by his first wife, and honestly asked after Cytherea's welfare.

'The third (and most remarkable). He seemed to have lost all consistency. Whilst expressing his love for Cytherea (which certainly is strong) and evincing the usual indifference to the first Mrs. Manston's fate, he was unable to conceal the intensity of his eagerness for me to advise him to advertise again for her.'

A week after the second, the third advertisement was inserted. A paragraph was attached, which stated that this would be the last time the announcement would appear.

3. THE FIRST OF FEBRUARY

At this, the eleventh hour, the postman brought a letter for Manston, directed in a woman's hand.

A bachelor friend of the steward's, Mr. Dickson by name, who was somewhat of a chatterer — *plenus rimarum* — and who boasted of an endless string of acquaintances, had come over from Casterbridge the preceding day by invitation — an invitation which had been a pleasant surprise to Dickson himself, insomuch that Manston, as a rule, voted him a bore almost to his face. He had stayed over the night, and was sitting at breakfast with his host when the important missive arrived.

Manston did not attempt to conceal the subject of the letter, or the name of the writer. First glancing the pages through, he read aloud as follows: —

“MY HUSBAND, — I implore your forgiveness.

“During the last thirteen months I have repeated to myself a hundred times that you should never discover what I voluntarily tell you now, namely, that I am alive and in perfect health.

“I have seen all your advertisements. Nothing but your persistence has won me round. Surely, I thought, he must love me still. Why else should he try to win back a woman who, faithful unto death as she will be, can, in a social sense, aid him towards acquiring nothing? — rather the reverse, indeed.

“You yourself state my own mind — that the only grounds upon which we can meet and live together, with a reasonable hope of happiness, must be a mutual consent to bury in oblivion all past differences. I heartily and willingly forget everything — and forgive everything. You will do the same, as your actions show.

“There will be plenty of opportunity for me to explain the few facts relating to my escape on the night of the fire. I will only give the heads in this hurried note. I was grieved at your not coming to fetch me, more grieved at your absence from the station, most of all by your absence from home. On my journey to the inn I writhed under a passionate sense of wrong done me. When I had been shown to my room I waited and hoped for you till the landlord had gone upstairs to bed. I still found that you did not come, and then I finally made up my mind to leave. I had half undressed, but I put on my things again, forgetting my watch (and I suppose dropping my keys, though I am not sure where) in my hurry, and slipped out of the house. The — ”

‘Well, that’s a rum story,’ said Mr. Dickson, interrupting.

‘What’s a rum story?’ said Manston hastily, and flushing in the face.

‘Forgetting her watch and dropping her keys in her hurry.’

‘I don’t see anything particularly wonderful in it. Any woman might do such a thing.’

‘Any woman might if escaping from fire or shipwreck, or any such immediate danger. But it seems incomprehensible to me that any woman in her senses, who quietly decides to leave a house, should be so forgetful.’

‘All that is required to reconcile your seeming with her facts is to assume that she was not in her senses, for that’s what she did plainly, or how could the things have been found there? Besides, she’s truthful enough.’ He spoke eagerly and peremptorily.

‘Yes, yes, I know that. I merely meant that it seemed rather odd.’

‘O yes.’ Manston read on: —

“ — and slipped out of the house. The rubbish-heap was burning up brightly, but the thought that the house was in danger did not strike me; I did not consider that it might be thatched.

“I idled in the lane behind the wood till the last down-train had come in, not being in a mood to face strangers. Whilst I was there the fire broke out, and this perplexed me still more. However, I was still determined not to stay in the place. I went to the railway-station, which was now quiet, and inquired of the solitary man on duty there concerning the trains. It was not till I had left the man that I saw the effect the fire might have on my history. I considered also, though not in any detailed manner, that

the event, by attracting the attention of the village to my former abode, might set people on my track should they doubt my death, and a sudden dread of having to go back again to Knapwater — a place which had seemed inimical to me from first to last — prompted me to run back and bribe the porter to secrecy. I then walked on to Anglebury, lingering about the outskirts of the town till the morning train came in, when I proceeded by it to London, and then took these lodgings, where I have been supporting myself ever since by needlework, endeavouring to save enough money to pay my passage home to America, but making melancholy progress in my attempt. However, all that is changed — can I be otherwise than happy at it? Of course not. I am happy. Tell me what I am to do, and believe me still to be your faithful wife, EUNICE.

“My name here is (as before)

“MRS. RONDLEY, and my address,
79 ADDINGTON STREET,
LAMBETH.”

The name and address were written on a separate slip of paper.

‘So it’s to be all right at last then,’ said Manston’s friend. ‘But after all there’s another woman in the case. You don’t seem very sorry for the little thing who is put to such distress by this turn of affairs? I wonder you can let her go so coolly.’ The speaker was looking out between the mullions of the window — noticing that some of the lights were glazed in lozenges, some in squares — as he said the words, otherwise he would have seen the passionate expression of agonized hopelessness that flitted across the steward’s countenance when the remark was made. He did not see it, and Manston answered after a short interval. The way in which he spoke of the young girl who had believed herself his wife, whom, a few short days ago, he had openly idolized, and whom, in his secret heart, he idolized still, as far as such a form of love was compatible with his nature, showed that from policy or otherwise, he meant to act up to the requirements of the position into which fate appeared determined to drive him.

‘That’s neither here nor there,’ he said; ‘it is a point of honour to do as I am doing, and there’s an end of it.’

‘Yes. Only I thought you used not to care overmuch about your first bargain.’

‘I certainly did not at one time. One is apt to feel rather weary of wives when they are so devilish civil under all aspects, as she used to be. But anything for a change — Abigail is lost, but Michal is recovered. You would hardly believe it, but she seems in fancy to be quite another bride — in fact, almost as if she had really risen from the dead, instead of having only done so virtually.’

‘You let the young pink one know that the other has come or is coming?’

‘Cui bono?’ The steward meditated critically, showing a portion of his intensely wide and regular teeth within the ruby lips.

‘I cannot say anything to her that will do any good,’ he resumed. ‘It would be awkward — either seeing or communicating with her again. The best plan to adopt will be to let matters take their course — she’ll find it all out soon enough.’

Manston found himself alone a few minutes later. He buried his face in his hands, and murmured, 'O my lost one! O my Cytherea! That it should come to this is hard for me! 'Tis now all darkness — "a land of darkness as darkness itself; and of the shadow of death without any order, and where the light is as darkness.'"

Yes, the artificial bearing which this extraordinary man had adopted before strangers ever since he had overheard the conversation at the inn, left him now, and he mourned for Cytherea aloud.

4. THE TWELFTH OF FEBRUARY

Knapwater Park is the picture — at eleven o'clock on a muddy, quiet, hazy, but bright morning — a morning without any blue sky, and without any shadows, the earth being enlivened and lit up rather by the spirit of an invisible sun than by its bodily presence.

The local Hunt had met for the day's sport on the open space of ground immediately in front of the steward's residence — called in the list of appointments, 'Old House, Knapwater' — the meet being here once every season, for the pleasure of Miss Aldclyffe and her friends.

Leaning out from one of the first-floor windows, and surveying with the keenest interest the lively picture of pink and black coats, rich-coloured horses, and sparkling bits and spurs, was the returned and long-lost woman, Mrs. Manston.

The eyes of those forming the brilliant group were occasionally turned towards her, showing plainly that her adventures were the subject of conversation equally with or more than the chances of the coming day. She did not flush beneath their scrutiny; on the contrary, she seemed rather to enjoy it, her eyes being kindled with a light of contented exultation, subdued to square with the circumstances of her matronly position.

She was, at the distance from which they surveyed her, an attractive woman — comely as the tents of Kedar. But to a close observer it was palpable enough that God did not do all the picture. Appearing at least seven years older than Cytherea, she was probably her senior by double the number, the artificial means employed to heighten the natural good appearance of her face being very cleverly applied. Her form was full and round, its voluptuous maturity standing out in strong contrast to the memory of Cytherea's lissom girliness.

It seems to be an almost universal rule that a woman who once has courted, or who eventually will court, the society of men on terms dangerous to her honour cannot refrain from flinging the meaning glance whenever the moment arrives in which the glance is strongly asked for, even if her life and whole future depended upon that moment's abstinence.

Had a cautious, uxorious husband seen in his wife's countenance what might now have been seen in this dark-eyed woman's as she caught a stray glance of flirtation from one or other of the red-coated gallants outside, he would have passed many days in an agony of restless jealousy and doubt. But Manston was not such a husband, and he was, moreover, calmly attending to his business at the other end of the manor.

The steward had fetched home his wife in the most matter-of-fact way a few days earlier, walking round the village with her the very next morning — at once putting an end, by this simple solution, to all the riddling inquiries and surmises that were rank in the village and its neighbourhood. Some men said that this woman was as far inferior to Cytherea as earth to heaven; others, older and sager, thought Manston better off with such a wife than he would have been with one of Cytherea's youthful impulses, and inexperience in household management. All felt their curiosity dying out of them. It was the same in Carriford as in other parts of the world — immediately circumstantial evidence became exchanged for direct, the loungers in court yawned, gave a final survey, and turned away to a subject which would afford more scope for speculation.

XV. THE EVENTS OF THREE WEEKS

1. FROM THE TWELFTH OF FEBRUARY TO THE SECOND OF MARCH

Owen Graye's recovery from the illness that had incapacitated him for so long a time was, professionally, the dawn of a brighter prospect for him in every direction, though the change was at first very gradual, and his movements and efforts were little more than mechanical. With the lengthening of the days, and the revival of building operations for the forthcoming season, he saw himself, for the first time, on a road which, pursued with care, would probably lead to a comfortable income at some future day. But he was still very low down the hill as yet.

The first undertaking entrusted to him in the new year began about a month after his return from Southampton. Mr. Gradfield had come back to him in the wake of his restored health, and offered him the superintendence, as clerk of works, of a church which was to be nearly rebuilt at the village of Tolchurch, fifteen or sixteen miles from Budmouth, and about half that distance from Carriford.

'I am now being paid at the rate of a hundred and fifty pounds a year,' he said to his sister in a burst of thankfulness, 'and you shall never, Cytherea, be at any tyrannous lady's beck and call again as long as I live. Never pine or think about what has happened, dear; it's no disgrace to you. Cheer up; you'll be somebody's happy wife yet.'

He did not say Edward Springrove's, for, greatly to his disappointment, a report had reached his ears that the friend to whom Cytherea owed so much had been about to pack up his things and sail for Australia. However, this was before the uncertainty concerning Mrs. Manston's existence had been dispersed by her return, a phenomenon that altered the cloudy relationship in which Cytherea had lately been standing towards her old lover, to one of distinctness; which result would have been delightful but for circumstances about to be mentioned.

Cytherea was still pale from her recent illness, and still greatly dejected. Until the news of Mrs. Manston's return had reached them, she had kept herself closely shut up

during the day-time, never venturing forth except at night. Sleeping and waking she had been in perpetual dread lest she should still be claimed by a man whom, only a few weeks earlier, she had regarded in the light of a future husband with quiet assent, not unmixed with cheerfulness.

But the removal of the uneasiness in this direction — by Mrs. Manston's arrival, and her own consequent freedom — had been the imposition of pain in another. Utterly fictitious details of the finding of Cytherea and Manston had been invented and circulated, unavoidably reaching her ears in the course of time. Thus the freedom brought no happiness, and it seemed well-nigh impossible that she could ever again show herself the sparkling creature she once had been —

‘Apt to entice a deity.’

On this account, and for the first time in his life, Owen made a point of concealing from her the real state of his feelings with regard to the unhappy transaction. He writhed in secret under the humiliation to which they had been subjected, till the resentment it gave rise to, and for which there was no vent, was sometimes beyond endurance; it induced a mood that did serious damage to the material and plodding perseverance necessary if he would secure permanently the comforts of a home for them.

They gave up their lodgings at Budmouth, and went to Tolchurch as soon as the work commenced.

Here they were domiciled in one half of an old farmhouse, standing not far from the ivy-covered church tower (which was all that was to remain of the original structure). The long steep roof of this picturesque dwelling sloped nearly down to the ground, the old tiles that covered it being overgrown with rich olive-hued moss. New red tiles in twos and threes had been used for patching the holes wrought by decay, lighting up the whole harmonious surface with dots of brilliant scarlet.

The chief internal features of this snug abode were a wide fireplace, enormous cupboards, a brown settle, and several sketches on the wood mantel, done in outline with the point of a hot poker — the subjects mainly consisting of old men walking painfully erect, with a curly-tailed dog behind.

After a week or two of residence in Tolchurch, and rambles amid the quaint scenery circumscribing it, a tranquillity began to spread itself through the mind of the maiden, which Graye hoped would be a preface to her complete restoration. She felt ready and willing to live the whole remainder of her days in the retirement of their present quarters: she began to sing about the house in low tremulous snatches —

“ — I said, if there's peace to be found in the world,

A heart that is humble may hope for it here.”

2. THE THIRD OF MARCH

Her convalescence had arrived at this point on a certain evening towards the end of the winter, when Owen had come in from the building hard by, and was changing his muddy boots for slippers, previously to sitting down to toast and tea.

A prolonged though quiet knocking came to the door.

The only person who ever knocked at their door in that way was the new vicar, the prime mover in the church-building. But he was that evening dining with the Squire.

Cytherea was uneasy at the sound — she did not know why, unless it was because her nerves were weakened by the sickness she had undergone. Instead of opening the door she ran out of the room, and upstairs.

‘What nonsense, Cytherea!’ said her brother, going to the door.

Edward Springrove stood in the grey light outside.

‘Capital — not gone to Australia, and not going, of course!’ cried Owen. ‘What’s the use of going to such a place as that? — I never believed that you would.’

‘I am going back to London again to-morrow,’ said Springrove, ‘and I called to say a word before going. Where is...?’

‘She has just run upstairs. Come in — never mind scraping your shoes — we are regular cottagers now; stone floor, yawning chimney-corner, and all, you see.’

‘Mrs. Manston came,’ said Edward awkwardly, when he had sat down in the chimney-corner by preference.

‘Yes.’ At mention of one of his skeletons Owen lost his blitheness at once, and fell into a reverie.

‘The history of her escape is very simple.’

‘Very.’

‘You know I always had wondered, when my father was telling any of the circumstances of the fire to me, how it could be that a woman could sleep so soundly as to be unaware of her horrid position till it was too late even to give shout or sound of any kind.’

‘Well, I think that would have been possible, considering her long wearisome journey. People have often been suffocated in their beds before they awoke. But it was hardly likely a body would be completely burnt to ashes as this was assumed to be, though nobody seemed to see it at the time. And how positive the surgeon was too, about those bits of bone! Why he should have been so, nobody can tell. I cannot help saying that if it has ever been possible to find pure stupidity incarnate, it was in that jury of Carriford. There existed in the mass the stupidity of twelve and not the penetration of one.’

‘Is she quite well?’ said Springrove.

‘Who? — O, my sister, Cytherea. Thank you, nearly well, now. I’ll call her.’

‘Wait one minute. I have a word to say to you.’

Owen sat down again.

‘You know, without my saying it, that I love Cytherea as dearly as ever... I think she loves me too, — does she really?’

There was in Owen enough of that worldly policy on the subject of matchmaking which naturally resides in the breasts of parents and guardians, to give him a certain caution in replying, and, younger as he was by five years than Edward, it had an odd effect.

‘Well, she may possibly love you still,’ he said, as if rather in doubt as to the truth of his words.

Springrove’s countenance instantly saddened; he had expected a simple ‘Yes,’ at the very least. He continued in a tone of greater depression —

‘Supposing she does love me, would it be fair to you and to her if I made her an offer of marriage, with these dreary conditions attached — that we lived for a few years on the narrowest system, till a great debt, which all honour and duty require me to pay off, shall be paid? My father, by reason of the misfortune that befell him, is under a great obligation to Miss Aldclyffe. He is getting old, and losing his energies. I am attempting to work free of the burden. This makes my prospects gloomy enough at present.

‘But consider again,’ he went on. ‘Cytherea has been left in a nameless and unsatisfactory, though innocent state, by this unfortunate, and now void, marriage with Manston. A marriage with me, though under the — materially — untoward conditions I have mentioned, would make us happy; it would give her a locus standi. If she wished to be out of the sound of her misfortunes we would go to another part of England — emigrate — do anything.’

‘I’ll call Cytherea,’ said Owen. ‘It is a matter which she alone can settle.’ He did not speak warmly. His pride could not endure the pity which Edward’s visit and errand tacitly implied. Yet, in the other affair, his heart went with Edward; he was on the same beat for paying off old debts himself.

‘Cythie, Mr. Springrove is here,’ he said, at the foot of the staircase.

His sister descended the creaking old steps with a faltering tread, and stood in the firelight from the hearth. She extended her hand to Springrove, welcoming him by a mere motion of the lip, her eyes averted — a habit which had engendered itself in her since the beginning of her illness and defamation. Owen opened the door and went out — leaving the lovers alone. It was the first time they had met since the memorable night at Southampton.

‘I will get a light,’ she said, with a little embarrassment.

‘No — don’t, please, Cytherea,’ said Edward softly, ‘Come and sit down with me.’

‘O yes. I ought to have asked you to,’ she returned timidly. ‘Everybody sits in the chimney-corner in this parish. You sit on that side. I’ll sit here.’

Two recesses — one on the right, one on the left hand — were cut in the inside of the fireplace, and here they sat down facing each other, on benches fitted to the recesses, the fire glowing on the hearth between their feet. Its ruddy light shone on the underslopes of their faces, and spread out over the floor of the room with the low horizontality of the setting sun, giving to every grain of sand and tumour in the paving a long shadow towards the door.

Edward looked at his pale love through the thin azure twines of smoke that went up like ringlets between them, and invested her, as seen through its medium, with the shadowy appearance of a phantom. Nothing is so potent for coaxing back the lost eyes of a woman as a discreet silence in the man who has so lost them — and thus the

patient Edward coaxed hers. After lingering on the hearth for half a minute, waiting in vain for another word from him, they were lifted into his face.

He was ready primed to receive them. 'Cytherea, will you marry me?' he said.

He could not wait in his original position till the answer came. Stepping across the front of the fire to her own side of the chimney corner, he reclined at her feet, and searched for her hand. She continued in silence awhile.

'Edward, I can never be anybody's wife,' she then said sadly, and with firmness.

'Think of it in every light,' he pleaded; 'the light of love, first. Then, when you have done that, see how wise a step it would be. I can only offer you poverty as yet, but I want — I do so long to secure you from the intrusion of that unpleasant past, which will often and always be thrust before you as long as you live the shrinking solitary life you do now — a life which purity chooses, it may be; but to the outside world it appears like the enforced loneliness of neglect and scorn — and tongues are busy inventing a reason for it which does not exist.'

'I know all about it,' she said hastily; 'and those are the grounds of my refusal. You and Owen know the whole truth — the two I love best on earth — and I am content. But the scandal will be continually repeated, and I can never give any one the opportunity of saying to you — that — your wife...' She utterly broke down and wept.

'Don't, my own darling!' he entreated. 'Don't, Cytherea!'

'Please to leave me — we will be friends, Edward — but don't press me — my mind is made up — I cannot — I will not marry you or any man under the present ambiguous circumstances — never will I — I have said it: never!'

They were both silent. He listlessly regarded the illuminated blackness overhead, where long flakes of soot floated from the sides and bars of the chimney-throat like tattered banners in ancient aisles; whilst through the square opening in the midst one or two bright stars looked down upon them from the grey March sky. The sight seemed to cheer him.

'At any rate you will love me?' he murmured to her.

'Yes — always — for ever and for ever!'

He kissed her once, twice, three times, and arose to his feet, slowly withdrawing himself from her side towards the door. Cytherea remained with her gaze fixed on the fire. Edward went out grieving, but hope was not extinguished even now.

He smelt the fragrance of a cigar, and immediately afterwards saw a small red star of fire against the darkness of the hedge. Graye was pacing up and down the lane, smoking as he walked. Springrove told him the result of the interview.

'You are a good fellow, Edward,' he said; 'but I think my sister is right.'

'I wish you would believe Manston a villain, as I do,' said Springrove.

'It would be absurd of me to say that I like him now — family feeling prevents it, but I cannot in honesty say deliberately that he is a bad man.'

Edward could keep the secret of Manston's coercion of Miss Aldclyffe in the matter of the houses a secret no longer. He told Owen the whole story.

‘That’s one thing,’ he continued, ‘but not all. What do you think of this — I have discovered that he went to Budmouth post-office for a letter the day before the first advertisement for his wife appeared in the papers. One was there for him, and it was directed in his wife’s handwriting, as I can prove. This was not till after the marriage with Cytherea, it is true, but if (as it seems to show) the advertising was a farce, there is a strong presumption that the rest of the piece was.’

Owen was too astounded to speak. He dropped his cigar, and fixed his eyes upon his companion.

‘Collusion!’

‘Yes.’

‘With his first wife?’

‘Yes — with his wife. I am firmly persuaded of it.’

‘What did you discover?’

‘That he fetched from the post-office at Budmouth a letter from her the day before the first advertisement appeared.’

Graye was lost in a long consideration. ‘Ah!’ he said, ‘it would be difficult to prove anything of that sort now. The writing could not be sworn to, and if he is guilty the letter is destroyed.’

‘I have other suspicions — ’

‘Yes — as you said’ interrupted Owen, who had not till now been able to form the complicated set of ideas necessary for picturing the position. ‘Yes, there is this to be remembered — Cytherea had been taken from him before that letter came — and his knowledge of his wife’s existence could not have originated till after the wedding. I could have sworn he believed her dead then. His manner was unmistakable.’

‘Well, I have other suspicions,’ repeated Edward; ‘and if I only had the right — if I were her husband or brother, he should be convicted of bigamy yet.’

‘The reproof was not needed,’ said Owen, with a little bitterness. ‘What can I do — a man with neither money nor friends — whilst Manston has Miss Aldclyffe and all her fortune to back him up? God only knows what lies between the mistress and her steward, but since this has transpired — if it is true — I can believe the connection to be even an unworthy one — a thing I certainly never so much as owned to myself before.’

3. THE FIFTH OF MARCH

Edward’s disclosure had the effect of directing Owen Graye’s thoughts into an entirely new and uncommon channel.

On the Monday after Springrove’s visit, Owen had walked to the top of a hill in the neighbourhood of Tolchurch — a wild hill that had no name, beside a barren down where it never looked like summer. In the intensity of his meditations on the ever-present subject, he sat down on a weather-beaten boundary-stone gazing towards the distant valleys — seeing only Manston’s imagined form.

Had his defenceless sister been trifled with? that was the question which affected him. Her refusal of Edward as a husband was, he knew, dictated solely by a humiliated

sense of inadequacy to him in repute, and had not been formed till since the slanderous tale accounting for her seclusion had been circulated. Was it not true, as Edward had hinted, that he, her brother, was neglecting his duty towards her in allowing Manston to thrive unquestioned, whilst she was hiding her head for no fault at all?

Was it possible that Manston was sensuous villain enough to have contemplated, at any moment before the marriage with Cytherea, the return of his first wife, when he should have grown weary of his new toy? Had he believed that, by a skilful manipulation of such circumstances as chance would throw in his way, he could escape all suspicion of having known that she lived? Only one fact within his own direct knowledge afforded the least ground for such a supposition. It was that, possessed by a woman only in the humble and unprotected station of a lady's hired companion, his sister's beauty might scarcely have been sufficient to induce a selfish man like Manston to make her his wife, unless he had foreseen the possibility of getting rid of her again.

'But for that stratagem of Manston's in relation to the Springroves,' Owen thought, 'Cythie might now have been the happy wife of Edward. True, that he influenced Miss Aldclyffe only rests on Edward's suspicions, but the grounds are good — the probability is strong.'

He went indoors and questioned Cytherea.

'On the night of the fire, who first said that Mrs. Manston was burnt?' he asked.

'I don't know who started the report.'

'Was it Manston?'

'It was certainly not he. All doubt on the subject was removed before he came to the spot — that I am certain of. Everybody knew that she did not escape after the house was on fire, and thus all overlooked the fact that she might have left before — of course that would have seemed such an improbable thing for anybody to do.'

'Yes, until the porter's story of her irritation and doubt as to her course made it natural.'

'What settled the matter at the inquest,' said Cytherea, 'was Mr. Manston's evidence that the watch was his wife's.'

'He was sure of that, wasn't he?'

'I believe he said he was certain of it.'

'It might have been hers — left behind in her perturbation, as they say it was — impossible as that seems at first sight. Yes — on the whole, he might have believed in her death.'

'I know by several proofs that then, and at least for some time after, he had no other thought than that she was dead. I now think that before the porter's confession he knew something about her — though not that she lived.'

'Why do you?'

'From what he said to me on the evening of the wedding-day, when I had fastened myself in the room at the hotel, after Edward's visit. He must have suspected that I knew something, for he was irritated, and in a passion of uneasy doubt. He said, "You

don't suppose my first wife is come to light again, madam, surely?" Directly he had let the remark slip out, he seemed anxious to withdraw it.'

'That's odd,' said Owen.

'I thought it very odd.'

'Still we must remember he might only have hit upon the thought by accident, in doubt as to your motive. Yes, the great point to discover remains the same as ever — did he doubt his first impression of her death before he married you. I can't help thinking he did, although he was so astounded at our news that night. Edward swears he did.'

'It was perhaps only a short time before,' said Cytherea; 'when he could hardly recede from having me.'

'Seasoning justice with mercy as usual, Cytherea. 'Tis unfair to yourself to talk like that. If I could only bring him to ruin as a bigamist — supposing him to be one — I should die happy. That's what we must find out by fair means or foul — was he a wilful bigamist?'

'It is no use trying, Owen. You would have to employ a solicitor, and how can you do that?'

'I can't at all — I know that very well. But neither do I altogether wish to at present — a lawyer must have a case — facts to go upon, that means. Now they are scarce at present — as scarce as money is with us, and till we have found more money there is no hurry for a lawyer. Perhaps by the time we have the facts we shall have the money. The only thing we lose in working alone in this way, is time — not the issue: for the fruit that one mind matures in a twelvemonth forms a more perfectly organized whole than that of twelve minds in one month, especially if the interests of the single one are vitally concerned, and those of the twelve are only hired. But there is not only my mind available — you are a shrewd woman, Cythie, and Edward is an earnest ally. Then, if we really get a sure footing for a criminal prosecution, the Crown will take up the case.'

'I don't much care to press on in the matter,' she murmured. 'What good can it do us, Owen, after all?'

'Selfishly speaking, it will do this good — that all the facts of your journey to Southampton will become known, and the scandal will die. Besides, Manston will have to suffer — it's an act of justice to you and to other women, and to Edward Springrove.'

He now thought it necessary to tell her of the real nature of the Springroves' obligation to Miss Aldclyffe — and their nearly certain knowledge that Manston was the prime mover in effecting their embarrassment. Her face flushed as she listened.

'And now,' he said, 'our first undertaking is to find out where Mrs. Manston lived during the separation; next, when the first communications passed between them after the fire.'

'If we only had Miss Aldclyffe's countenance and assistance as I used to have them,' Cytherea returned, 'how strong we should be! O, what power is it that he exercises over her, swaying her just as he wishes! She loves me now. Mrs. Morris in her letter

said that Miss Aldclyffe prayed for me — yes, she heard her praying for me, and crying. Miss Aldclyffe did not mind an old friend like Mrs. Morris knowing it, either. Yet in opposition to this, notice her dead silence and inaction throughout this proceeding.’

‘It is a mystery; but never mind that now,’ said Owen impressively. ‘About where Mrs. Manston has been living. We must get this part of it first — learn the place of her stay in the early stage of their separation, during the period of Manston’s arrival here, and so on, for that was where she was first communicated with on the subject of coming to Knapwater, before the fire; and that address, too, was her point of departure when she came to her husband by stealth in the night — you know — the time I visited you in the evening and went home early in the morning, and it was found that he had been visited too. Ah! couldn’t we inquire of Mrs. Leat, who keeps the post-office at Carriford, if she remembers where the letters to Mrs. Manston were directed?’

‘He never posted his letters to her in the parish — it was remarked at the time. I was thinking if something relating to her address might not be found in the report of the inquest in the Casterbridge Chronicle of the date. Some facts about the inquest were given in the papers to a certainty.’

Her brother caught eagerly at the suggestion. ‘Who has a file of the Chronicles?’ he said.

‘Mr. Raunham used to file them,’ said Cytherea. ‘He was rather friendly-disposed towards me, too.’

Owen could not, on any consideration, escape from his attendance at the church-building till Saturday evening; and thus it became necessary, unless they actually wasted time, that Cytherea herself should assist. ‘I act under your orders, Owen,’ she said.

XVI. THE EVENTS OF ONE WEEK

1. MARCH THE SIXTH

The next morning the opening move of the game was made. Cytherea, under cover of a thick veil, hired a conveyance and drove to within a mile or so of Carriford. It was with a renewed sense of depression that she saw again the objects which had become familiar to her eye during her sojourn under Miss Aldclyffe’s roof — the outline of the hills, the meadow streams, the old park trees. She hastened by a lonely path to the rectory-house, and asked if Mr. Raunham was at home.

Now the rector, though a solitary bachelor, was as gallant and courteous to womankind as an ancient Iberian; and, moreover, he was Cytherea’s friend in particular, to an extent far greater than she had ever surmised. Rarely visiting his relative, Miss Aldclyffe, except on parish matters, more rarely still being called upon by Miss Aldclyffe, Cytherea had learnt very little of him whilst she lived at Knapwater. The relationship was on the impecunious paternal side, and for this branch of her family the lady of the estate had never evinced much sympathy. In looking back upon our line of descent it

is an instinct with us to feel that all our vitality was drawn from the richer party to any unequal marriage in the chain.

Since the death of the old captain, the rector's bearing in Knapwater House had been almost that of a stranger, a circumstance which he himself was the last man in the world to regret. This polite indifference was so frigid on both sides that the rector did not concern himself to preach at her, which was a great deal in a rector; and she did not take the trouble to think his sermons poor stuff, which in a cynical woman was a great deal more.

Though barely fifty years of age, his hair was as white as snow, contrasting strangely with the redness of his skin, which was as fresh and healthy as a lad's. Cytherea's bright eyes, mutely and demurely glancing up at him Sunday after Sunday, had been the means of driving away many of the saturnine humours that creep into an empty heart during the hours of a solitary life; in this case, however, to supplant them, when she left his parish, by those others of a more aching nature which accompany an overfull one. In short, he had been on the verge of feeling towards her that passion to which his dignified self-respect would not give its true name, even in the privacy of his own thought.

He received her kindly; but she was not disposed to be frank with him. He saw her wish to be reserved, and with genuine good taste and good nature made no comment whatever upon her request to be allowed to see the Chronicle for the year before the last. He placed the papers before her on his study table, with a timidity as great as her own, and then left her entirely to herself.

She turned them over till she came to the first heading connected with the subject of her search — 'Disastrous Fire and Loss of Life at Carriford.'

The sight, and its calamitous bearing upon her own life, made her so dizzy that she could, for a while, hardly decipher the letters. Stifling recollection by an effort she nerved herself to her work, and carefully read the column. The account reminded her of no other fact than was remembered already.

She turned on to the following week's report of the inquest. After a miserable perusal she could find no more pertaining to Mrs. Manston's address than this: —

'ABRAHAM BROWN, of Hoxton, London, at whose house the deceased woman had been living, deposed,' etc.

Nobody else from London had attended the inquest. She arose to depart, first sending a message of thanks to Mr. Raunham, who was out of doors gardening.

He stuck his spade into the ground, and accompanied her to the gate.

'Can I help you in anything, Cytherea?' he said, using her Christian name by an intuition that unpleasant memories might be revived if he called her Miss Graye after wishing her good-bye as Mrs. Manston at the wedding. Cytherea saw the motive and appreciated it, nevertheless replying evasively —

'I only guess and fear.'

He earnestly looked at her again.

‘Promise me that if you want assistance, and you think I can give it, you will come to me.’

‘I will,’ she said.

The gate closed between them.

‘You don’t want me to help you in anything now, Cytherea?’ he repeated.

If he had spoken what he felt, ‘I want very much to help you, Cytherea, and have been watching Manston on your account,’ she would gladly have accepted his offer. As it was, she was perplexed, and raised her eyes to his, not so fearlessly as before her trouble, but as modestly, and with still enough brightness in them to do fearful execution as she said over the gate —

‘No, thank you.’

She returned to Tolchurch weary with her day’s work. Owen’s greeting was anxious

—
‘Well, Cytherea?’

She gave him the words from the report of the inquest, pencilled on a slip of paper.

‘Now to find out the name of the street and number,’ Owen remarked.

‘Owen,’ she said, ‘will you forgive me for what I am going to say? I don’t think I can — indeed I don’t think I can — take any further steps towards disentangling the mystery. I still think it a useless task, and it does not seem any duty of mine to be revenged upon Mr. Manston in any way.’ She added more gravely, ‘It is beneath my dignity as a woman to labour for this; I have felt it so all day.’

‘Very well,’ he said, somewhat shortly; ‘I shall work without you then. There’s dignity in justice.’ He caught sight of her pale tired face, and the dilated eye which always appeared in her with weariness. ‘Darling,’ he continued warmly, and kissing her, ‘you shall not work so hard again — you are worn out quite. But you must let me do as I like.’

2. MARCH THE TENTH

On Saturday evening Graye hurried off to Casterbridge, and called at the house of the reporter to the Chronicle. The reporter was at home, and came out to Graye in the passage. Owen explained who and what he was, and asked the man if he would oblige him by turning to his notes of the inquest at Carriford in the December of the year preceding the last — just adding that a family entanglement, of which the reporter probably knew something, made him anxious to ascertain some additional details of the event, if any existed.

‘Certainly,’ said the other, without hesitation; ‘though I am afraid I haven’t much beyond what we printed at the time. Let me see — my old note-books are in my drawer at the office of the paper: if you will come with me I can refer to them there.’ His wife and family were at tea inside the room, and with the timidity of decent poverty everywhere he seemed glad to get a stranger out of his domestic groove.

They crossed the street, entered the office, and went thence to an inner room. Here, after a short search, was found the book required. The precise address, not given in the

condensed report that was printed, but written down by the reporter, was as follows:

—
'ABRAHAM BROWN,
LODGING-HOUSE KEEPER,
41 CHARLES SQUARE,
HOXTON.'

Owen copied it, and gave the reporter a small fee. 'I want to keep this inquiry private for the present,' he said hesitatingly. 'You will perhaps understand why, and oblige me.'

The reporter promised. 'News is shop with me,' he said, 'and to escape from handling it is my greatest social enjoyment.'

It was evening, and the outer room of the publishing-office was lighted up with flaring jets of gas. After making the above remark, the reporter came out from the inner apartment in Graye's company, answering an expression of obligation from Owen with the words that it was no trouble. At the moment of his speech, he closed behind him the door between the two rooms, still holding his note-book in his hand.

Before the counter of the front room stood a tall man, who was also speaking, when they emerged. He said to the youth in attendance, 'I will take my paper for this week now I am here, so that you needn't post it to me.'

The stranger then slightly turned his head, saw Owen, and recognized him. Owen passed out without recognizing the other as Manston.

Manston then looked at the reporter, who, after walking to the door with Owen, had come back again to lock up his books. Manston did not need to be told that the shabby marble-covered book which he held in his hand, opening endways and interleaved with blotting-paper, was an old reporting-book. He raised his eyes to the reporter's face, whose experience had not so schooled his features but that they betrayed a consciousness, to one half initiated as the other was, that his late proceeding had been connected with events in the life of the steward. Manston said no more, but, taking his newspaper, followed Owen from the office, and disappeared in the gloom of the street.

Edward Springrove was now in London again, and on this same evening, before leaving Casterbridge, Owen wrote a careful letter to him, stating therein all the facts that had come to his knowledge, and begging him, as he valued Cytherea, to make cautious inquiries. A tall man was standing under the lamp-post, about half-a-dozen yards above the post-office, when he dropped the letter into the box.

That same night, too, for a reason connected with the rencounter with Owen Graye, the steward entertained the idea of rushing off suddenly to London by the mail-train, which left Casterbridge at ten o'clock. But remembering that letters posted after the hour at which Owen had obtained his information — whatever that was — could not be delivered in London till Monday morning, he changed his mind and went home to Knapwater. Making a confidential explanation to his wife, arrangements were set on foot for his departure by the mail on Sunday night.

3. MARCH THE ELEVENTH

Starting for church the next morning several minutes earlier than was usual with him, the steward intentionally loitered along the road from the village till old Mr. Springrove overtook him. Manston spoke very civilly of the morning, and of the weather, asking how the farmer's barometer stood, and when it was probable that the wind might change. It was not in Mr. Springrove's nature — going to church as he was, too — to return anything but a civil answer to such civil questions, however his feelings might have been biassed by late events. The conversation was continued on terms of greater friendliness.

'You must be feeling settled again by this time, Mr. Springrove, after the rough turn-out you had on that terrible night in November.'

'Ay, but I don't know about feeling settled, either, Mr. Manston. The old window in the chimney-corner of the old house I shall never forget. No window in the chimney-corner where I am now, and I had been used to it for more than fifty years. Ted says 'tis a great loss to me, and he knows exactly what I feel.'

'Your son is again in a good situation, I believe?' said Manston, imitating that inquisitiveness into the private affairs of the natives which passes for high breeding in country villages.

'Yes, sir. I hope he'll keep it, or do something else and stick to it.'

'Tis to be hoped he'll be steady now.'

'He's always been that, I assure 'ee,' said the old man tartly.

'Yes — yes — I mean intellectually steady. Intellectual wild oats will thrive in a soil of the strictest morality.'

'Intellectual gingerbread! Ted's steady enough — that's all I know about it.'

'Of course — of course. Has he respectable lodgings? My own experience has shown me that that's a great thing to a young man living alone in London.'

'Warwick Street, Charing Cross — that's where he is.'

'Well, to be sure — strange! A very dear friend of mine used to live at number fifty-two in that very same street.'

'Edward lives at number forty-nine — how very near being the same house!' said the old farmer, pleased in spite of himself.

'Very,' said Manston. 'Well, I suppose we had better step along a little quicker, Mr. Springrove; the parson's bell has just begun.'

'Number forty-nine,' he murmured.

4. MARCH THE TWELFTH

Edward received Owen's letter in due time, but on account of his daily engagements he could not attend to any request till the clock had struck five in the afternoon. Rushing then from his office in Westminster, he called a hansom and proceeded to Hoxton. A few minutes later he knocked at the door of number forty-one, Charles Square, the old lodging of Mrs. Manston.

A tall man who would have looked extremely handsome had he not been clumsily and closely wrapped up in garments that were much too elderly in style for his years, stood at the corner of the quiet square at the same instant, having, too, alighted from

a cab, that had been driven along Old Street in Edward's rear. He smiled confidently when Springrove knocked.

Nobody came to the door. Springrove knocked again.

This brought out two people — one at the door he had been knocking upon, the other from the next on the right.

'Is Mr. Brown at home?' said Springrove.

'No, sir.'

'When will he be in?'

'Quite uncertain.'

'Can you tell me where I may find him?'

'No. O, here he is coming, sir. That's Mr. Brown.'

Edward looked down the pavement in the direction pointed out by the woman, and saw a man approaching. He proceeded a few steps to meet him.

Edward was impatient, and to a certain extent still a countryman, who had not, after the manner of city men, subdued the natural impulse to speak out the ruling thought without preface. He said in a quiet tone to the stranger, 'One word with you — do you remember a lady lodger of yours of the name of Mrs. Manston?'

Mr. Brown half closed his eyes at Springrove, somewhat as if he were looking into a telescope at the wrong end.

'I have never let lodgings in my life,' he said, after his survey.

'Didn't you attend an inquest a year and a half ago, at Carriford?'

'Never knew there was such a place in the world, sir; and as to lodgings, I have taken acres first and last during the last thirty years, but I have never let an inch.'

'I suppose there is some mistake,' Edward murmured, and turned away. He and Mr. Brown were now opposite the door next to the one he had knocked at. The woman who was still standing there had heard the inquiry and the result of it.

'I expect it is the other Mr. Brown, who used to live there, that you want, sir,' she said. 'The Mr. Brown that was inquired for the other day?'

'Very likely that is the man,' said Edward, his interest reawakening.

'He couldn't make a do of lodging-letting here, and at last he went to Cornwall, where he came from, and where his brother still lived, who had often asked him to come home again. But there was little luck in the change; for after London they say he couldn't stand the rainy west winds they get there, and he died in the December following. Will you step into the passage?'

'That's unfortunate,' said Edward, going in. 'But perhaps you remember a Mrs. Manston living next door to you?'

'O yes,' said the landlady, closing the door. 'The lady who was supposed to have met with such a horrible fate, and was alive all the time. I saw her the other day.'

'Since the fire at Carriford?'

'Yes. Her husband came to ask if Mr. Brown was still living here — just as you might. He seemed anxious about it; and then one evening, a week or fortnight afterwards, when he came again to make further inquiries, she was with him. But I did not speak to her

— she stood back, as if she were shy. I was interested, however, for old Mr. Brown had told me all about her when he came back from the inquest.’

‘Did you know Mrs. Manston before she called the other day?’

‘No. You see she was only Mr. Brown’s lodger for two or three weeks, and I didn’t know she was living there till she was near upon leaving again — we don’t notice next-door people much here in London. I much regretted I had not known her when I heard what had happened. It led me and Mr. Brown to talk about her a great deal afterwards. I little thought I should see her alive after all.’

‘And when do you say they came here together?’

‘I don’t exactly remember the day — though I remember a very beautiful dream I had that same night — ah, I shall never forget it! Shoals of lodgers coming along the square with angels’ wings and bright golden sovereigns in their hands wanting apartments at West End prices. They would not give any less; no, not if you — ’

‘Yes. Did Mrs. Manston leave anything, such as papers, when she left these lodgings originally?’ said Edward, though his heart sank as he asked. He felt that he was outwitted. Manston and his wife had been there before him, clearing the ground of all traces.

‘I have always said “No” hitherto,’ replied the woman, ‘considering I could say no more if put upon my oath, as I expected to be. But speaking in a common everyday way now the occurrence is past, I believe a few things of some kind (though I doubt if they were papers) were left in a workbox she had, because she talked about it to Mr. Brown, and was rather angry at what occurred — you see, she had a temper by all account, and so I didn’t like to remind the lady of this workbox when she came the other day with her husband.’

‘And about the workbox?’

‘Well, from what was casually dropped, I think Mrs. Manston had a few articles of furniture she didn’t want, and when she was leaving they were put in a sale just by. Amongst her things were two workboxes very much alike. One of these she intended to sell, the other she didn’t, and Mr. Brown, who collected the things together, took the wrong one to the sale.’

‘What was in it?’

‘O, nothing in particular, or of any value — some accounts, and her usual sewing materials I think — nothing more. She didn’t take much trouble to get it back — she said the bills were worth nothing to her or anybody else, but that she should have liked to keep the box because her husband gave it her when they were first married, and if he found she had parted with it, he would be vexed.’

‘Did Mrs. Manston, when she called recently with her husband, allude to this, or inquire for it, or did Mr. Manston?’

‘No — and I rather wondered at it. But she seemed to have forgotten it — indeed, she didn’t make any inquiry at all, only standing behind him, listening to his; and he probably had never been told anything about it.’

‘Whose sale were these articles of hers taken to?’

‘Who was the auctioneer? Mr. Halway. His place is the third turning from the end of that street you see there. Anybody will tell you the shop — his name is written up.’

Edward went off to follow up his clue with a promptness which was dictated more by a dogged will to do his utmost than by a hope of doing much. When he was out of sight, the tall and cloaked man, who had watched him, came up to the woman’s door, with an appearance of being in breathless haste.

‘Has a gentleman been here inquiring about Mrs. Manston?’

‘Yes; he’s just gone.’

‘Dear me! I want him.’

‘He’s gone to Mr. Halway’s.’

‘I think I can give him some information upon the subject. Does he pay pretty liberally?’

‘He gave me half-a-crown.’

‘That scale will do. I’m a poor man, and will see what my little contribution to his knowledge will fetch. But, by the way, perhaps you told him all I know — where she lived before coming to live here?’

‘I didn’t know where she lived before coming here. O no — I only said what Mr. Brown had told me. He seemed a nice, gentle young man, or I shouldn’t have been so open as I was.’

‘I shall now about catch him at Mr. Halway’s,’ said the man, and went away as hastily as he had come.

Edward in the meantime had reached the auction-room. He found some difficulty, on account of the inertness of those whose only inducement to an action is a mere wish from another, in getting the information he stood in need of, but it was at last accorded him. The auctioneer’s book gave the name of Mrs. Higgins, 3 Canley Passage, as the purchaser of the lot which had included Mrs. Manston’s workbox.

Thither Edward went, followed by the man. Four bell pulls, one above the other like waistcoat-buttons, appeared on the door-post. Edward seized the first he came to.

‘Who did you want?’ said a thin voice from somewhere.

Edward looked above and around him; nobody was visible.

‘Who did you want?’ said the thin voice again.

He found now that the sound proceeded from below the grating covering the basement window. He dropped his glance through the bars, and saw a child’s white face.

‘Who did you want?’ said the voice the third time, with precisely the same languid inflection.

‘Mrs. Higgins,’ said Edward.

‘Third bell up,’ said the face, and disappeared.

He pulled the third bell from the bottom, and was admitted by another child, the daughter of the woman he was in search of. He gave the little thing sixpence, and asked for her mamma. The child led him upstairs.

Mrs. Higgins was the wife of a carpenter who from want of employment one winter had decided to marry. Afterwards they both took to drink, and sank into desperate

circumstances. A few chairs and a table were the chief articles of furniture in the third-floor back room which they occupied. A roll of baby-linen lay on the floor; beside it a pap-clogged spoon and an overturned tin pap-cup. Against the wall a Dutch clock was fixed out of level, and ticked wildly in longs and shorts, its entrails hanging down beneath its white face and wiry hands, like the faeces of a Harpy ('foedissima ventris proluvies, uncaequae manus, et pallida semper ora'). A baby was crying against every chair-leg, the whole family of six or seven being small enough to be covered by a washing-tub. Mrs. Higgins sat helpless, clothed in a dress which had hooks and eyes in plenty, but never one opposite the other, thereby rendering the dress almost useless as a screen to the bosom. No workbox was visible anywhere.

It was a depressing picture of married life among the very poor of a city. Only for one short hour in the whole twenty-four did husband and wife taste genuine happiness. It was in the evening, when, after the sale of some necessary article of furniture, they were under the influence of a quarter of gin.

Of all the ingenious and cruel satires that from the beginning till now have been stuck like knives into womankind, surely there is not one so lacerating to them, and to us who love them, as the trite old fact, that the most wretched of men can, in the twinkling of an eye, find a wife ready to be more wretched still for the sake of his company.

Edward hastened to despatch his errand.

Mrs. Higgins had lately pawned the workbox with other useless articles of lumber, she said. Edward bought the duplicate of her, and went downstairs to the pawnbroker's.

In the back division of a musty shop, amid the heterogeneous collection of articles and odours invariably crowding such places, he produced his ticket, and with a sense of satisfaction out of all proportion to the probable worth of his acquisition, took the box and carried it off under his arm. He attempted to lift the cover as he walked, but found it locked.

It was dusk when Springrove reached his lodging. Entering his small sitting-room, the front apartment on the ground floor, he struck a light, and proceeded to learn if any scrap or mark within or upon his purchase rendered it of moment to the business in hand. Breaking open the cover with a small chisel, and lifting the tray, he glanced eagerly beneath, and found — nothing.

He next discovered that a pocket or portfolio was formed on the underside of the cover. This he unfastened, and slipping his hand within, found that it really contained some substance. First he pulled out about a dozen tangled silk and cotton threads. Under them were a short household account, a dry moss-rosebud, and an old pair of *carte-de-visite* photographs. One of these was a likeness of Mrs. Manston — 'Eunice' being written under it in ink — the other of Manston himself.

He sat down dispirited. This was all the fruit of his task — not a single letter, date, or address of any kind to help him — and was it likely there would be?

However, thinking he would send the fragments, such as they were, to Graye, in order to satisfy him that he had done his best so far, he scribbled a line, and put all

except the silk and cotton into an envelope. Looking at his watch, he found it was then twenty minutes to seven; by affixing an extra stamp he would be enabled to despatch them by that evening's post. He hastily directed the packet, and ran with it at once to the post-office at Charing Cross.

On his return he took up the workbox again to examine it more leisurely. He then found there was also a small cavity in the tray under the pincushion, which was movable by a bit of ribbon. Lifting this he uncovered a flattened sprig of myrtle, and a small scrap of crumpled paper. The paper contained a verse or two in a man's handwriting. He recognized it as Manston's, having seen notes and bills from him at his father's house. The stanza was of a complimentary character, descriptive of the lady who was now Manston's wife.

'EUNICE.

'Whoso for hours or lengthy days
Shall catch her aspect's changeful rays,
Then turn away, can none recall
Beyond a galaxy of all
In hazy portraiture;
Lit by the light of azure eyes
Like summer days by summer skies:
Her sweet transitions seem to be
A kind of pictured melody,
And not a set contour.

'AE. M.'

To shake, pull, and ransack the box till he had almost destroyed it was now his natural action. But it contained absolutely nothing more.

'Disappointed again,' he said, flinging down the box, the bit of paper, and the withered twig that had lain with it.

Yet valueless as the new acquisition was, on second thoughts he considered that it would be worth while to make good the statement in his late note to Graye — that he had sent everything the box contained except the sewing-thread. Thereupon he enclosed the verse and myrtle-twig in another envelope, with a remark that he had overlooked them in his first search, and put it on the table for the next day's post.

In his hurry and concentration upon the matter that occupied him, Springrove, on entering his lodging and obtaining a light, had not waited to pull down the blind or close the shutters. Consequently all that he had done had been visible from the street. But as on an average not one person a minute passed along the quiet pavement at this time of the evening, the discovery of the omission did not much concern his mind.

But the real state of the case was that a tall man had stood against the opposite wall and watched the whole of his proceeding. When Edward came out and went to the Charing Cross post-office, the man followed him and saw him drop the letter into the box. The stranger did not further trouble himself to follow Springrove back to his lodging again.

Manston now knew that there had been photographs of some kind in his wife's workbox, and though he had not been near enough to see them, he guessed whose they were. The least reflection told him to whom they had been sent.

He paused a minute under the portico of the post-office, looking at the two or three omnibuses stopping and starting in front of him. Then he rushed along the Strand, through Holywell Street, and on to Old Boswell Court. Kicking aside the shoeblacks who began to importune him as he passed under the colonnade, he turned up the narrow passage to the publishing-office of the Post-Office Directory. He begged to be allowed to see the Directory of the south-west counties of England for a moment.

The shopman immediately handed down the volume from a shelf, and Manston retired with it to the window-bench. He turned to the county, and then to the parish of Tolchurch. At the end of the historical and topographical description of the village he read: —

'Postmistress — Mrs. Hurston. Letters received at 6.30 A.M. by foot-post from Anglebury.'

Returning his thanks, he handed back the book and quitted the office, thence pursuing his way to an obscure coffee-house by the Strand, where he now partook of a light dinner. But rest seemed impossible with him. Some absorbing intention kept his body continually on the move. He paid his bill, took his bag in his hand, and went out to idle about the streets and over the river till the time should have arrived at which the night-mail left the Waterloo Station, by which train he intended to return homeward.

There exists, as it were, an outer chamber to the mind, in which, when a man is occupied centrally with the most momentous question of his life, casual and trifling thoughts are just allowed to wander softly for an interval, before being banished altogether. Thus, amid his concentration did Manston receive perceptions of the individuals about him in the lively thoroughfare of the Strand; tall men looking insignificant; little men looking great and profound; lost women of miserable repute looking as happy as the days are long; wives, happy by assumption, looking careworn and miserable. Each and all were alike in this one respect, that they followed a solitary trail like the inwoven threads which form a banner, and all were equally unconscious of the significant whole they collectively showed forth.

At ten o'clock he turned into Lancaster Place, crossed the river, and entered the railway-station, where he took his seat in the down mail-train, which bore him, and Edward Springrove's letter to Graye, far away from London.

XVII. THE EVENTS OF ONE DAY

1. MARCH THE THIRTEENTH. THREE TO SIX O'CLOCK A.M.

They entered Anglebury Station in the dead, still time of early morning, the clock over the booking-office pointing to twenty-five minutes to three. Manston lingered on the platform and saw the mail-bags brought out, noticing, as a pertinent pastime, the

many shabby blotches of wax from innumerable seals that had been set upon their mouths. The guard took them into a fly, and was driven down the road to the post-office.

It was a raw, damp, uncomfortable morning, though, as yet, little rain was falling. Manston drank a mouthful from his flask and walked at once away from the station, pursuing his way through the gloom till he stood on the side of the town adjoining, at a distance from the last house in the street of about two hundred yards.

The station road was also the turnpike-road into the country, the first part of its course being across a heath. Having surveyed the highway up and down to make sure of its bearing, Manston methodically set himself to walk backwards and forwards a stone's throw in each direction. Although the spring was temperate, the time of day, and the condition of suspense in which the steward found himself, caused a sensation of chilliness to pervade his frame in spite of the overcoat he wore. The drizzling rain increased, and drops from the trees at the wayside fell noisily upon the hard road beneath them, which reflected from its glassy surface the faint halo of light hanging over the lamps of the adjacent town.

Here he walked and lingered for two hours, without seeing or hearing a living soul. Then he heard the market-house clock strike five, and soon afterwards, quick hard footsteps smote upon the pavement of the street leading towards him. They were those of the postman for the Tolchurch beat. He reached the bottom of the street, gave his bags a final hitch-up, stepped off the pavement, and struck out for the country with a brisk shuffle.

Manston then turned his back upon the town, and walked slowly on. In two minutes a flickering light shone upon his form, and the postman overtook him.

The new-comer was a short, stooping individual of above five-and-forty, laden on both sides with leather bags large and small, and carrying a little lantern strapped to his breast, which cast a tiny patch of light upon the road ahead.

'A tryen mornen for travellers!' the postman cried, in a cheerful voice, without turning his head or slackening his trot.

'It is, indeed,' said Manston, stepping out abreast of him. 'You have a long walk every day.'

'Yes — a long walk — for though the distance is only sixteen miles on the straight — that is, eight to the furthest place and eight back, what with the ins and outs to the gentlemen's houses, it makes two-and-twenty for my legs. Two-and-twenty miles a day, how many a year? I used to reckon it, but I never do now. I don't care to think o' my wear and tear, now it do begin to tell upon me.'

Thus the conversation was begun, and the postman proceeded to narrate the different strange events that marked his experience. Manston grew very friendly.

'Postman, I don't know what your custom is,' he said, after a while; 'but between you and me, I always carry a drop of something warm in my pocket when I am out on such a morning as this. Try it.' He handed the bottle of brandy.

'If you'll excuse me, please. I haven't took no stimmilents these five years.'

“Tis never too late to mend.’

‘Against the regulations, I be afraid.’

‘Who’ll know it?’

‘That’s true — nobody will know it. Still, honesty’s the best policy.’

‘Ah — it is certainly. But, thank God, I’ve been able to get on without it yet. You’ll surely drink with me?’

‘Really, ‘tis a’most too early for that sort o’ thing — however, to oblige a friend, I don’t object to the faintest shadder of a drop.’ The postman drank, and Manston did the same to a very slight degree. Five minutes later, when they came to a gate, the flask was pulled out again.

‘Well done!’ said the postman, beginning to feel its effect; ‘but guide my soul, I be afraid ‘twill hardly do!’

‘Not unless ‘tis well followed, like any other line you take up,’ said Manston. ‘Besides, there’s a way of liking a drop of liquor, and of being good — even religious — at the same time.’

‘Ay, for some thimble-and-button in-an-out fellers; but I could never get into the knack o’ it; not I.’

‘Well, you needn’t be troubled; it isn’t necessary for the higher class of mind to be religious — they have so much common-sense that they can risk playing with fire.’

‘That hits me exactly.’

‘In fact, a man I know, who always had no other god but “Me;” and devoutly loved his neighbour’s wife, says now that believing is a mistake.’

‘Well, to be sure! However, believing in God is a mistake made by very few people, after all.’

‘A true remark.’

‘Not one Christian in our parish would walk half a mile in a rain like this to know whether the Scripture had concluded him under sin or grace.’

‘Nor in mine.’

‘Ah, you may depend upon it they’ll do away wi’ Goddymity altogether afore long, although we’ve had him over us so many years.’

‘There’s no knowing.’

‘And I suppose the Queen ‘ill be done away wi’ then. A pretty concern that’ll be! Nobody’s head to put on your letters; and then your honest man who do pay his penny will never be known from your scamp who don’t. O, ‘tis a nation!’

‘Warm the cockles of your heart, however. Here’s the bottle waiting.’

‘I’ll oblige you, my friend.’

The drinking was repeated. The postman grew livelier as he went on, and at length favoured the steward with a song, Manston himself joining in the chorus.

‘He flung his mallet against the wall,

Said, “The Lord make churches and chapels to fall,

And there’ll be work for tradesmen all!”

When Joan’s ale was new,

My boys,

When Joan's ale was new.'

'You understand, friend,' the postman added, 'I was originally a mason by trade: no offence to you if you be a parson?'

'None at all,' said Manston.

The rain now came down heavily, but they pursued their path with alacrity, the produce of the several fields between which the lane wound its way being indicated by the peculiar character of the sound emitted by the falling drops. Sometimes a soaking hiss proclaimed that they were passing by a pasture, then a pattering would show that the rain fell upon some large-leaved root crop, then a paddling plash announced the naked arable, the low sound of the wind in their ears rising and falling with each pace they took.

Besides the small private bags of the county families, which were all locked, the postman bore the large general budget for the remaining inhabitants along his beat. At each village or hamlet they came to, the postman searched for the packet of letters destined for that place, and thrust it into an ordinary letter-hole cut in the door of the receiver's cottage — the village post-offices being mostly kept by old women who had not yet risen, though lights moving in other cottage windows showed that such people as carters, woodmen, and stablemen had long been stirring.

The postman had by this time become markedly unsteady, but he still continued to be too conscious of his duties to suffer the steward to search the bag. Manston was perplexed, and at lonely points in the road cast his eyes keenly upon the short bowed figure of the man trotting through the mud by his side, as if he were half inclined to run a very great risk indeed.

It frequently happened that the houses of farmers, clergymen, etc., lay a short distance up or down a lane or path branching from the direct track of the postman's journey. To save time and distance, at the point of junction of some of these paths with the main road, the gate-post was hollowed out to form a letter-box, in which the postman deposited his missives in the morning, looking in the box again in the evening to collect those placed there for the return post. Tolchurch Vicarage and Farmstead, lying back from the village street, were served on this principle. This fact the steward now learnt by conversing with the postman, and the discovery relieved Manston greatly, making his intentions much clearer to himself than they had been in the earlier stages of his journey.

They had reached the outskirts of the village. Manston insisted upon the flask being emptied before they proceeded further. This was done, and they approached the church, the vicarage, and the farmhouse in which Owen and Cytherea were living.

The postman paused, fumbled in his bag, took out by the light of his lantern some half-dozen letters, and tried to sort them. He could not perform the task.

'We be crippled disciples a b'lieve,' he said, with a sigh and a stagger.

'Not drunk, but market-merry,' said Manston cheerfully.

‘Well done! If I baint so weak that I can’t see the clouds — much less letters. Guide my soul, if so be anybody should tell the Queen’s postmaster-general of me! The whole story will have to go through Parliament House, and I shall be high-treasoned — as safe as houses — and be fined, and who’ll pay for a poor martel! O, ‘tis a world!’

‘Trust in the Lord — he’ll pay.’

‘He pay a b’lieve! why should he when he didn’t drink the drink? He pay a b’lieve! D’ye think the man’s a fool?’

‘Well, well, I had no intention of hurting your feelings — but how was I to know you were so sensitive?’

‘True — you were not to know I was so sensitive. Here’s a caddle wi’ these letters! Guide my soul, what will Billy do!’

Manston offered his services.

‘They are to be divided,’ the man said.

‘How?’ said Manston.

‘These, for the village, to be carried on into it: any for the vicarage or vicarage farm must be left in the box of the gate-post just here. There’s none for the vicarage-house this mornen, but I saw when I started there was one for the clerk o’ works at the new church. This is it, isn’t it?’

He held up a large envelope, directed in Edward Springrove’s handwriting: —

‘MR. O. GRAYE,
CLERK OF WORKS,
TOLCHURCH,
NEAR ANGLEBURY.’

The letter-box was scooped in an oak gate-post about a foot square. There was no slit for inserting the letters, by reason of the opportunity such a lonely spot would have afforded mischievous peasant-boys of doing damage had such been the case; but at the side was a small iron door, kept close by an iron reversible strap locked across it. One side of this strap was painted black, the other white, and white or black outwards implied respectively that there were letters inside, or none.

The postman had taken the key from his pocket and was attempting to insert it in the keyhole of the box. He touched one side, the other, above, below, but never made a straight hit.

‘Let me unlock it,’ said Manston, taking the key from the postman. He opened the box and reached out with his other hand for Owen’s letter.

‘No, no. O no — no,’ the postman said. ‘As one of — Majesty’s servants — care — Majesty’s mails — duty — put letters — own hands.’ He slowly and solemnly placed the letter in the small cavity.

‘Now lock it,’ he said, closing the door.

The steward placed the bar across, with the black side outwards, signifying ‘empty,’ and turned the key.

‘You’ve put the wrong side outwards!’ said the postman. ‘‘Tisn’t empty.’

‘And dropped the key in the mud, so that I can’t alter it,’ said the steward, letting something fall.

‘What an awkward thing!’

‘It is an awkward thing.’

They both went searching in the mud, which their own trampling had reduced to the consistency of pap, the postman unstrapping his little lantern from his breast, and thrusting it about, close to the ground, the rain still drizzling down, and the dawn so tardy on account of the heavy clouds that daylight seemed delayed indefinitely. The rays of the lantern were rendered individually visible upon the thick mist, and seemed almost tangible as they passed off into it, after illuminating the faces and knees of the two stooping figures dripping with wet; the postman’s cape and private bags, and the steward’s valise, glistening as if they had been varnished.

‘It fell on the grass,’ said the postman.

‘No; it fell in the mud,’ said Manston. They searched again.

‘I’m afraid we shan’t find it by this light,’ said the steward at length, washing his muddy fingers in the wet grass of the bank.

‘I’m afraid we shan’t,’ said the other, standing up.

‘I’ll tell you what we had better do,’ said Manston. ‘I shall be back this way in an hour or so, and since it was all my fault, I’ll look again, and shall be sure to find it in the daylight. And I’ll hide the key here for you.’ He pointed to a spot behind the post. ‘It will be too late to turn the index then, as the people will have been here, so that the box had better stay as it is. The letter will only be delayed a day, and that will not be noticed; if it is, you can say you placed the iron the wrong way without knowing it, and all will be well.’

This was agreed to by the postman as the best thing to be done under the circumstances, and the pair went on. They had passed the village and come to a crossroad, when the steward, telling his companion that their paths now diverged, turned off to the left towards Carriford.

No sooner was the postman out of sight and hearing than Manston stalked back to the vicarage letter-box by keeping inside a fence, and thus avoiding the village; arrived here, he took the key from his pocket, where it had been concealed all the time, and abstracted Owen’s letter. This done, he turned towards home, by the help of what he carried in his valise adjusting himself to his ordinary appearance as he neared the quarter in which he was known.

An hour and half’s sharp walking brought him to his own door in Knapwater Park.

2. EIGHT O’CLOCK A.M.

Seated in his private office he wetted the flap of the stolen letter, and waited patiently till the adhesive gum could be loosened. He took out Edward’s note, the accounts, the rosebud, and the photographs, regarding them with the keenest interest and anxiety.

The note, the accounts, the rosebud, and his own photograph, he restored to their places again. The other photograph he took between his finger and thumb, and held it towards the bars of the grate. There he held it for half-a-minute or more, meditating.

‘It is a great risk to run, even for such an end,’ he muttered.

Suddenly, impregnated with a bright idea, he jumped up and left the office for the front parlour. Taking up an album of portraits, which lay on the table, he searched for three or four likenesses of the lady who had so lately displaced Cytherea, which were interspersed among the rest of the collection, and carefully regarded them. They were taken in different attitudes and styles, and he compared each singly with that he held in his hand. One of them, the one most resembling that abstracted from the letter in general tone, size, and attitude, he selected from the rest, and returned with it to his office.

Pouring some water into a plate, he set the two portraits afloat upon it, and sitting down tried to read.

At the end of a quarter of an hour, after several ineffectual attempts, he found that each photograph would peel from the card on which it was mounted. This done, he threw into the fire the original likeness and the recent card, stuck upon the original card the recent likeness from the album, dried it before the fire, and placed it in the envelope with the other scraps.

The result he had obtained, then, was this: in the envelope were now two photographs, both having the same photographer’s name on the back and consecutive numbers attached. At the bottom of the one which showed his own likeness, his own name was written down; on the other his wife’s name was written; whilst the central feature, and whole matter to which this latter card and writing referred, the likeness of a lady mounted upon it, had been changed.

Mrs. Manston entered the room, and begged him to come to breakfast. He followed her and they sat down. During the meal he told her what he had done, with scrupulous regard to every detail, and showed her the result.

‘It is indeed a great risk to run,’ she said, sipping her tea.

‘But it would be a greater not to do it.’

‘Yes.’

The envelope was again fastened up as before, and Manston put it in his pocket and went out. Shortly afterwards he was seen, on horseback, riding in a direction towards Tolchurch. Keeping to the fields, as well as he could, for the greater part of the way, he dropped into the road by the vicarage letter-box, and looking carefully about, to ascertain that no person was near, he restored the letter to its nook, placed the key in its hiding-place, as he had promised the postman, and again rode homewards by a roundabout way.

3. AFTERNOON

The letter was brought to Owen Graye, the same afternoon, by one of the vicar’s servants who had been to the box with a duplicate key, as usual, to leave letters for the evening post. The man found that the index had told falsely that morning for the

first time within his recollection; but no particular attention was paid to the mistake, as it was considered. The contents of the envelope were scrutinized by Owen and flung aside as useless.

The next morning brought Springrove's second letter, the existence of which was unknown to Manston. The sight of Edward's handwriting again raised the expectations of brother and sister, till Owen had opened the envelope and pulled out the twig and verse.

'Nothing that's of the slightest use, after all,' he said to her; 'we are as far as ever from the merest shadow of legal proof that would convict him of what I am morally certain he did, marry you, suspecting, if not knowing, her to be alive all the time.'

'What has Edward sent?' said Cytherea.

'An old amatory verse in Manston's writing. Fancy,' he said bitterly, 'this is the strain he addressed her in when they were courting — as he did you, I suppose.'

He handed her the verse and she read —

'EUNICE.

'Whoso for hours or lengthy days
Shall catch her aspect's changeful rays,
Then turn away, can none recall
Beyond a galaxy of all
In hazy portraiture;
Lit by the light of azure eyes
Like summer days by summer skies:
Her sweet transitions seem to be
A kind of pictured melody,
And not a set contour.

'AE. M.'

A strange expression had overspread Cytherea's countenance. It rapidly increased to the most death-like anguish. She flung down the paper, seized Owen's hand tremblingly, and covered her face.

'Cytherea! What is it, for Heaven's sake?'

'Owen — suppose — O, you don't know what I think.'

'What?'

'“The light of azure eyes,” she repeated with ashy lips.

'Well, “the light of azure eyes”?' he said, astounded at her manner.

'Mrs. Morris said in her letter to me that her eyes are black!'

'H'm. Mrs. Morris must have made a mistake — nothing likelier.'

'She didn't.'

'They might be either in this photograph,' said Owen, looking at the card bearing Mrs. Manston's name.

'Blue eyes would scarcely photograph so deep in tone as that,' said Cytherea. 'No, they seem black here, certainly.'

'Well, then, Manston must have blundered in writing his verses.'

‘But could he? Say a man in love may forget his own name, but not that he forgets the colour of his mistress’s eyes. Besides she would have seen the mistake when she read them, and have had it corrected.’

‘That’s true, she would,’ mused Owen. ‘Then, Cytherea, it comes to this — you must have been misinformed by Mrs. Morris, since there is no other alternative.’

‘I suppose I must.’

Her looks belied her words.

‘What makes you so strange — ill?’ said Owen again.

‘I can’t believe Mrs. Morris wrong.’

‘But look at this, Cytherea. If it is clear to us that the woman had blue eyes two years ago, she must have blue eyes now, whatever Mrs. Morris or anybody else may fancy. Any one would think that Manston could change the colour of a woman’s eyes to hear you.’

‘Yes,’ she said, and paused.

‘You say yes, as if he could,’ said Owen impatiently.

‘By changing the woman herself,’ she exclaimed. ‘Owen, don’t you see the horrid — what I dread? — that the woman he lives with is not Mrs. Manston — that she was burnt after all — and that I am his wife!’

She tried to support a stoicism under the weight of this new trouble, but no! The unexpected revulsion of ideas was so overwhelming that she crept to him and leant against his breast.

Before reflecting any further upon the subject Graye led her upstairs and got her to lie down. Then he went to the window and stared out of it up the lane, vainly endeavouring to come to some conclusion upon the fantastic enigma that confronted him. Cytherea’s new view seemed incredible, yet it had such a hold upon her that it would be necessary to clear it away by positive proof before contemplation of her fear should have preyed too deeply upon her.

‘Cytherea,’ he said, ‘this will not do. You must stay here alone all the afternoon whilst I go to Carriford. I shall know all when I return.’

‘No, no, don’t go!’ she implored.

‘Soon, then, not directly.’ He saw her subtle reasoning — that it was folly to be wise.

Reflection still convinced him that good would come of persevering in his intention and dispelling his sister’s idle fears. Anything was better than this absurd doubt in her mind. But he resolved to wait till Sunday, the first day on which he might reckon upon seeing Mrs. Manston without suspicion. In the meantime he wrote to Edward Springrove, requesting him to go again to Mrs. Manston’s former lodgings.

XVIII. THE EVENTS OF THREE DAYS

1. MARCH THE EIGHTEENTH

Sunday morning had come, and Owen was trudging over the six miles of hill and dale that lay between Tolchurch and Carriford.

Edward Springrove's answer to the last letter, after expressing his amazement at the strange contradiction between the verses and Mrs. Morris's letter, had been to the effect that he had again visited the neighbour of the dead Mr. Brown, and had received as near a description of Mrs. Manston as it was possible to get at second-hand, and by hearsay. She was a tall woman, wide at the shoulders, and full-chested, and she had a straight and rather large nose. The colour of her eyes the informant did not know, for she had only seen the lady in the street as she went in or out. This confusing remark was added. The woman had almost recognized Mrs. Manston when she had called with her husband lately, but she had kept her veil down. Her residence, before she came to Hoxton, was quite unknown to this next-door neighbour, and Edward could get no manner of clue to it from any other source.

Owen reached the church-door a few minutes before the bells began chiming. Nobody was yet in the church, and he walked round the aisles. From Cytherea's frequent description of how and where herself and others used to sit, he knew where to look for Manston's seat; and after two or three errors of examination he took up a prayer-book in which was written 'Eunice Manston.' The book was nearly new, and the date of the writing about a month earlier. One point was at any rate established: that the woman living with Manston was presented to the world as no other than his lawful wife.

The quiet villagers of Carriford required no pew-opener in their place of worship: natives and in-dwellers had their own seats, and strangers sat where they could. Graye took a seat in the nave, on the north side, close behind a pillar dividing it from the north aisle, which was completely allotted to Miss Aldclyffe, her farmers, and her retainers, Manston's pew being in the midst of them. Owen's position on the other side of the passage was a little in advance of Manston's seat, and so situated that by leaning forward he could look directly into the face of any person sitting there, though, if he sat upright, he was wholly hidden from such a one by the intervening pillar.

Aiming to keep his presence unknown to Manston if possible, Owen sat, without once turning his head, during the entrance of the congregation. A rustling of silk round by the north passage and into Manston's seat, told him that some woman had entered there, and as it seemed from the accompaniment of heavier footsteps, Manston was with her.

Immediately upon rising up, he looked intently in that direction, and saw a lady standing at the end of the seat nearest himself. Portions of Manston's figure appeared on the other side of her. In two glances Graye read thus many of her characteristics, and in the following order: —

She was a tall woman.

She was broad at the shoulders.

She was full-bosomed.

She was easily recognizable from the photograph but nothing could be discerned of the colour of her eyes.

With a preoccupied mind he withdrew into his nook, and heard the service continued — only conscious of the fact that in opposition to the suspicion which one odd circumstance had bred in his sister concerning this woman, all ostensible and ordinary proofs and probabilities tended to the opposite conclusion. There sat the genuine original of the portrait — could he wish for more? Cytherea wished for more. Eunice Manston's eyes were blue, and it was necessary that this woman's eyes should be blue also.

Unskilled labour wastes in beating against the bars ten times the energy exerted by the practised hand in the effective direction. Owen felt this to be the case in his own and Edward's attempts to follow up the clue afforded them. Think as he might, he could not think of a crucial test in the matter absorbing him, which should possess the indispensable attribute — a capability of being applied privately; that in the event of its proving the lady to be the rightful owner of the name she used, he might recede without obloquy from an untenable position.

But to see Mrs. Manston's eyes from where he sat was impossible, and he could do nothing in the shape of a direct examination at present. Miss Aldclyffe had possibly recognized him, but Manston had not, and feeling that it was indispensable to keep the purport of his visit a secret from the steward, he thought it would be as well, too, to keep his presence in the village a secret from him; at any rate, till the day was over.

At the first opening of the doors, Graye left the church and wandered away into the fields to ponder on another scheme. He could not call on Farmer Springrove, as he had intended, until this matter was set at rest. Two hours intervened between the morning and afternoon services.

This time had nearly expired before Owen had struck out any method of proceeding, or could decide to run the risk of calling at the Old House and asking to see Mrs. Manston point-blank. But he had drawn near the place, and was standing still in the public path, from which a partial view of the front of the building could be obtained, when the bells began chiming for afternoon service. Whilst Graye paused, two persons came from the front door of the half-hidden dwelling whom he presently saw to be Manston and his wife. Manston was wearing his old garden-hat, and carried one of the monthly magazines under his arm. Immediately they had passed the gateway he branched off and went over the hill in a direction away from the church, evidently intending to ramble along, and read as the humour moved him. The lady meanwhile turned in the other direction, and went into the church path.

Owen resolved to make something of this opportunity. He hurried along towards the church, doubled round a sharp angle, and came back upon the other path, by which Mrs. Manston must arrive.

In about three minutes she appeared in sight without a veil. He discovered, as she drew nearer, a difficulty which had not struck him at first — that it is not an easy matter to particularize the colour of a stranger's eyes in a merely casual encounter on a path out of doors. That Mrs. Manston must be brought close to him, and not only so, but to look closely at him, if his purpose were to be accomplished.

He shaped a plan. It might by chance be effectual; if otherwise, it would not reveal his intention to her. When Mrs. Manston was within speaking distance, he went up to her and said —

‘Will you kindly tell me which turning will take me to Casterbridge?’

‘The second on the right,’ said Mrs. Manston.

Owen put on a blank look: he held his hand to his ear — conveying to the lady the idea that he was deaf.

She came closer and said more distinctly —

‘The second turning on the right.’

Owen flushed a little. He fancied he had beheld the revelation he was in search of. But had his eyes deceived him?

Once more he used the ruse, still drawing nearer and intimating by a glance that the trouble he gave her was very distressing to him.

‘How very deaf!’ she murmured. She exclaimed loudly —

‘The second turning to the right.’

She had advanced her face to within a foot of his own, and in speaking mouthed very emphatically, fixing her eyes intently upon his. And now his first suspicion was indubitably confirmed. Her eyes were as black as midnight.

All this feigning was most distasteful to Graye. The riddle having been solved, he unconsciously assumed his natural look before she had withdrawn her face. She found him to be peering at her as if he would read her very soul — expressing with his eyes the notification of which, apart from emotion, the eyes are more capable than any other — inquiry.

Her face changed its expression — then its colour. The natural tint of the lighter portions sank to an ashy gray; the pink of her cheeks grew purpler. It was the precise result which would remain after blood had left the face of one whose skin was dark, and artificially coated with pearl-powder and carmine.

She turned her head and moved away, murmuring a hasty reply to Owen’s farewell remark of ‘Good-day,’ and with a kind of nervous twitch lifting her hand and smoothing her hair, which was of a light-brown colour.

‘She wears false hair,’ he thought, ‘or has changed its colour artificially. Her true hair matched her eyes.’

And now, in spite of what Mr. Brown’s neighbours had said about nearly recognizing Mrs. Manston on her recent visit — which might have meant anything or nothing; in spite of the photograph, and in spite of his previous incredulity; in consequence of the verse, of her silence and backwardness at the visit to Hoxton with Manston, and of her appearance and distress at the present moment, Graye had a conviction that the woman was an impostor.

What could be Manston’s reason for such an astounding trick he could by no stretch of imagination divine.

He changed his direction as soon as the woman was out of sight, and plodded along the lanes homeward to Tolchurch.

One new idea was suggested to him by his desire to allay Cytherea's dread of being claimed, and by the difficulty of believing that the first Mrs. Manston lost her life as supposed, notwithstanding the inquest and verdict. Was it possible that the real Mrs. Manston, who was known to be a Philadelphian by birth, had returned by the train to London, as the porter had said, and then left the country under an assumed name, to escape that worst kind of widowhood — the misery of being wedded to a fickle, faithless, and truant husband?

In her complicated distress at the news brought by her brother, Cytherea's thoughts at length reverted to her friend, the Rector of Carriford. She told Owen of Mr. Raunham's warm-hearted behaviour towards herself, and of his strongly expressed wish to aid her.

'He is not only a good, but a sensible man. We seem to want an old head on our side.'

'And he is a magistrate,' said Owen in a tone of concurrence. He thought, too, that no harm could come of confiding in the rector, but there was a difficulty in bringing about the confidence. He wished that his sister and himself might both be present at an interview with Mr. Raunham, yet it would be unwise for them to call on him together, in the sight of all the servants and parish of Carriford.

There could be no objection to their writing him a letter.

No sooner was the thought born than it was carried out. They wrote to him at once, asking him to have the goodness to give them some advice they sadly needed, and begging that he would accept their assurance that there was a real justification for the additional request they made — that instead of their calling upon him, he would any evening of the week come to their cottage at Tolchurch.

2. MARCH THE TWENTIETH. SIX TO NINE O'CLOCK P.M.

Two evenings later, to the total disarrangement of his dinner-hour, Mr. Raunham appeared at Owen's door. His arrival was hailed with genuine gratitude. The horse was tied to the palings, and the rector ushered indoors and put into the easy-chair.

Then Graye told him the whole story, reminding him that their first suspicions had been of a totally different nature, and that in endeavouring to obtain proof of their truth they had stumbled upon marks which had surprised them into these new uncertainties, thrice as marvellous as the first, yet more prominent.

Cytherea's heart was so full of anxiety that it superinduced a manner of confidence which was a death-blow to all formality. Mr. Raunham took her hand pityingly.

'It is a serious charge,' he said, as a sort of original twig on which his thoughts might precipitate themselves.

'Assuming for a moment that such a substitution was rendered an easy matter by fortuitous events,' he continued, 'there is this consideration to be placed beside it — what earthly motive can Mr. Manston have had which would be sufficiently powerful to lead him to run such a very great risk? The most abandoned rouse could not, at that particular crisis, have taken such a reckless step for the mere pleasure of a new companion.'

Owen had seen that difficulty about the motive; Cytherea had not.

‘Unfortunately for us,’ the rector resumed, ‘no more evidence is to be obtained from the porter, Chinney. I suppose you know what became of him? He got to Liverpool and embarked, intending to work his way to America, but on the passage he fell overboard and was drowned. But there is no doubt of the truth of his confession — in fact, his conduct tends to prove it true — and no moral doubt of the fact that the real Mrs. Manston left here to go back by that morning’s train. This being the case, then, why, if this woman is not she, did she take no notice of the advertisement — I mean not necessarily a friendly notice, but from the information it afforded her have rendered it impossible that she should be personified without her own connivance?’

‘I think that argument is overthrown,’ Graye said, ‘by my earliest assumption of her hatred of him, weariness of the chain which bound her to him, and a resolve to begin the world anew. Let’s suppose she has married another man — somewhere abroad, say; she would be silent for her own sake.’

‘You’ve hit the only genuine possibility,’ said Mr. Raunham, tapping his finger upon his knee. ‘That would decidedly dispose of the second difficulty. But his motive would be as mysterious as ever.’

Cytherea’s pictured dreads would not allow her mind to follow their conversation. ‘She’s burnt,’ she said. ‘O yes; I fear — I fear she is!’

‘I don’t think we can seriously believe that now, after what has happened,’ said the rector.

Still straining her thought towards the worst, ‘Then, perhaps, the first Mrs. Manston was not his wife,’ she returned; ‘and then I should be his wife just the same, shouldn’t I?’

‘They were married safely enough,’ said Owen. ‘There is abundance of circumstantial evidence to prove that.’

‘Upon the whole,’ said Mr. Raunham, ‘I should advise your asking in a straightforward way for legal proof from the steward that the present woman is really his original wife — a thing which, to my mind, you should have done at the outset.’ He turned to Cytherea kindly, and asked her what made her give up her husband so unceremoniously.

She could not tell the rector of her aversion to Manston, and of her unquenched love for Edward.

‘Your terrified state no doubt,’ he said, answering for her, in the manner of those accustomed to the pulpit. ‘But into such a solemn compact as marriage, all-important considerations, both legally and morally, enter; it was your duty to have seen everything clearly proved. Doubtless Mr. Manston is prepared with proofs, but as it concerns nobody but yourself that her identity should be publicly established (and by your absenteeism you act as if you were satisfied) he has not troubled to exhibit them. Nobody else has taken the trouble to prove what does not affect them in the least — that’s the way of the world always. You, who should have required all things to be made clear, ran away.’

‘That was partly my doing,’ said Owen.

The same explanation — her want of love for Manston — applied here too, but she shunned the revelation.

‘But never mind,’ added the rector, ‘it was all the greater credit to your womanhood, perhaps. I say, then, get your brother to write a line to Mr. Manston, saying you wish to be satisfied that all is legally clear (in case you should want to marry again, for instance), and I have no doubt that you will be. Or, if you would rather, I’ll write myself?’

‘O no, sir, no,’ pleaded Cytherea, beginning to blanch, and breathing quickly. ‘Please don’t say anything. Let me live here with Owen. I am so afraid it will turn out that I shall have to go to Knapwater and be his wife, and I don’t want to go. Do conceal what we have told you. Let him continue his deception — it is much the best for me.’

Mr. Raunham at length divined that her love for Manston, if it had ever existed, had transmuted itself into a very different feeling now.

‘At any rate,’ he said, as he took his leave and mounted his mare, ‘I will see about it. Rest content, Miss Graye, and depend upon it that I will not lead you into difficulty.’

‘Conceal it,’ she still pleaded.

‘We’ll see — but of course I must do my duty.’

‘No — don’t do your duty!’ She looked up at him through the gloom, illuminating her own face and eyes with the candle she held.

‘I will consider, then,’ said Mr. Raunham, sensibly moved. He turned his horse’s head, bade them a warm adieu, and left the door.

The rector of Carriford trotted homewards under the cold and clear March sky, its countless stars fluttering like bright birds. He was unconscious of the scene. Recovering from the effect of Cytherea’s voice and glance of entreaty, he laid the subject of the interview clearly before himself.

The suspicions of Cytherea and Owen were honest, and had foundation — that he must own. Was he — a clergyman, magistrate, and conscientious man — justified in yielding to Cytherea’s importunities to keep silence, because she dreaded the possibility of a return to Manston? Was she wise in her request? Holding her present belief, and with no definite evidence either way, she could, for one thing, never conscientiously marry any one else. Suppose that Cytherea were Manston’s wife — i.e., that the first wife was really burnt? The adultery of Manston would be proved, and, Mr. Raunham thought, cruelty sufficient to bring the case within the meaning of the statute. Suppose the new woman was, as stated, Mr. Manston’s restored wife? Cytherea was perfectly safe as a single woman whose marriage had been void. And if it turned out that, though this woman was not Manston’s wife, his wife was still living, as Owen had suggested, in America or elsewhere, Cytherea was safe.

The first supposition opened up the worst contingency. Was she really safe as Manston’s wife? Doubtful. But, however that might be, the gentle, defenceless girl, whom it seemed nobody’s business to help or defend, should be put in a track to proceed against this man. She had but one life, and the superciliousness with which all the

world now regarded her should be compensated in some measure by the man whose carelessness — to set him in the best light — had caused it.

Mr. Raunham felt more and more positively that his duty must be done. An inquiry must be made into the matter. Immediately on reaching home, he sat down and wrote a plain and friendly letter to Mr. Manston, and despatched it at once to him by hand. Then he flung himself back in his chair, and went on with his meditation. Was there anything in the suspicion? There could be nothing, surely. Nothing is done by a clever man without a motive, and what conceivable motive could Manston have for such abnormal conduct? Corinthian that he might be, who had preyed on virginity like St. George's dragon, he would never have been absurd enough to venture on such a course for the possession alone of the woman — there was no reason for it — she was inferior to Cytherea in every respect, physical and mental.

On the other hand, it seemed rather odd, when he analyzed the action, that a woman who deliberately hid herself from her husband for more than a twelvemonth should be brought back by a mere advertisement. In fact, the whole business had worked almost too smoothly and effectually for unpremeditated sequence. It was too much like the indiscriminate righting of everything at the end of an old play. And there was that curious business of the keys and watch. Her way of accounting for their being left behind by forgetfulness had always seemed to him rather forced. The only unforced explanation was that suggested by the newspaper writers — that she left them behind on purpose to blind people as to her escape, a motive which would have clashed with the possibility of her being fished back by an advertisement, as the present woman had been. Again, there were the two charred bones. He shuffled the books and papers in his study, and walked about the room, restlessly musing on the same subject. The parlour-maid entered.

'Can young Mr. Springrove from London see you to-night, sir?'

'Young Mr. Springrove?' said the rector, surprised.

'Yes, sir.'

'Yes, of course he can see me. Tell him to come in.'

Edward came so impatiently into the room, as to show that the few short moments his announcement had occupied had been irksome to him. He stood in the doorway with the same black bag in his hand, and the same old gray cloak on his shoulders, that he had worn fifteen months earlier when returning on the night of the fire. This appearance of his conveyed a true impression; he had become a stagnant man. But he was excited now.

'I have this moment come from London,' he said, as the door was closed behind him.

The prophetic insight, which so strangely accompanies critical experiences, prompted Mr. Raunham's reply.

'About the Grays and Manston?'

'Yes. That woman is not Mrs. Manston.'

'Prove it.'

‘I can prove that she is somebody else — that her name is Anne Seaway.’

‘And are their suspicions true indeed!’

‘And I can do what’s more to the purpose at present.’

‘Suggest Manston’s motive?’

‘Only suggest it, remember. But my assumption fits so perfectly with the facts that have been secretly unearthed and conveyed to me, that I can hardly conceive of another.’

There was in Edward’s bearing that entire unconsciousness of himself which, natural to wild animals, only prevails in a sensitive man at moments of extreme intentness. The rector saw that he had no trivial story to communicate, whatever the story was.

‘Sit down,’ said Mr. Raunham. ‘My mind has been on the stretch all the evening to form the slightest guess at such an object, and all to no purpose — entirely to no purpose. Have you said anything to Owen Graye?’

‘Nothing — nor to anybody. I could not trust to the effect a letter might have upon yourself, either; the intricacy of the case brings me to this interview.’

Whilst Springrove had been speaking the two had sat down together. The conversation, hitherto distinct to every corner of the room, was carried on now in tones so low as to be scarcely audible to the interlocutors, and in phrases which hesitated to complete themselves. Three-quarters of an hour passed. Then Edward arose, came out of the rector’s study and again flung his cloak around him. Instead of going thence homeward, he went first to the Carriford Road Station with a telegram, having despatched which he proceeded to his father’s house for the first time since his arrival in the village.

3. FROM NINE TO TEN O’CLOCK P.M.

The next presentation is the interior of the Old House on the evening of the preceding section. The steward was sitting by his parlour fire, and had been reading the letter arrived from the rectory. Opposite to him sat the woman known to the village and neighbourhood as Mrs. Manston.

‘Things are looking desperate with us,’ he said gloomily. His gloom was not that of the hypochondriac, but the legitimate gloom which has its origin in a syllogism. As he uttered the words he handed the letter to her.

‘I almost expected some such news as this,’ she replied, in a tone of much greater indifference. ‘I knew suspicion lurked in the eyes of that young man who stared at me so in the church path: I could have sworn it.’

Manston did not answer for some time. His face was worn and haggard; latterly his head had not been carried so uprightly as of old. ‘If they prove you to be — who you are... Yes, if they do,’ he murmured.

‘They must not find that out,’ she said, in a positive voice, and looking at him. ‘But supposing they do, the trick does not seem to me to be so serious as to justify that wretched, miserable, horrible look of yours. It makes my flesh creep; it is perfectly deathlike.’

He did not reply, and she continued, ‘If they say and prove that Eunice is indeed living — and dear, you know she is — she is sure to come back.’

This remark seemed to awaken and irritate him to speech. Again, as he had done a hundred times during their residence together, he categorized the events connected with the fire at the Three Tranters. He dwelt on every incident of that night's history, and endeavoured, with an anxiety which was extraordinary in the apparent circumstances, to prove that his wife must, by the very nature of things, have perished in the flames. She arose from her seat, crossed the hearthrug, and set herself to soothe him; then she whispered that she was still as unbelieving as ever. 'Come, supposing she escaped — just supposing she escaped — where is she?' coaxed the lady.

'Why are you so curious continually?' said Manston.

'Because I am a woman and want to know. Now where is she?'

'In the Flying Isle of San Borandan.'

'Witty cruelty is the cruellest of any. Ah, well — if she is in England, she will come back.'

'She is not in England.'

'But she will come back?'

'No, she won't... Come, madam,' he said, arousing himself, 'I shall not answer any more questions.'

'Ah — ah — ah — she is not dead,' the woman murmured again poutingly.

'She is, I tell you.'

'I don't think so, love.'

'She was burnt, I tell you!' he exclaimed.

'Now to please me, admit the bare possibility of her being alive — just the possibility.'

'O yes — to please you I will admit that,' he said quickly. 'Yes, I admit the possibility of her being alive, to please you.'

She looked at him in utter perplexity. The words could only have been said in jest, and yet they seemed to savour of a tone the furthest remove from jesting. There was his face plain to her eyes, but no information of any kind was to be read there.

'It is only natural that I should be curious,' she murmured pettishly, 'if I resemble her as much as you say I do.'

'You are handsomer,' he said, 'though you are about her own height and size. But don't worry yourself. You must know that you are body and soul united with me, though you are but my housekeeper.'

She bridled a little at the remark. 'Wife,' she said, 'most certainly wife, since you cannot dismiss me without losing your character and position, and incurring heavy penalties.'

'I own it — it was well said, though mistakenly — very mistakenly.'

'Don't riddle to me about mistakenly and such dark things. Now what was your motive, dearest, in running the risk of having me here?'

'Your beauty,' he said.

'She thanks you much for the compliment, but will not take it. Come, what was your motive?'

‘Your wit.’

‘No, no; not my wit. Wit would have made a wife of me by this time instead of what I am.’

‘Your virtue.’

‘Or virtue either.’

‘I tell you it was your beauty — really.’

‘But I cannot help seeing and hearing, and if what people say is true, I am not nearly so good-looking as Cytherea, and several years older.’

The aspect of Manston’s face at these words from her was so confirmatory of her hint, that his forced reply of ‘O no,’ tended to develop her chagrin.

‘Mere liking or love for me,’ she resumed, ‘would not have sprung up all of a sudden, as your pretended passion did. You had been to London several times between the time of the fire and your marriage with Cytherea — you had never visited me or thought of my existence or cared that I was out of a situation and poor. But the week after you married her and were separated from her, off you rush to make love to me — not first to me either, for you went to several places — ’

‘No, not several places.’

‘Yes, you told me so yourself — that you went first to the only lodging in which your wife had been known as Mrs. Manston, and when you found that the lodging-house-keeper had gone away and died, and that nobody else in the street had any definite ideas as to your wife’s personal appearance, and came and proposed the arrangement we carried out — that I should personate her. Your taking all this trouble shows that something more serious than love had to do with the matter.’

‘Humbug — what trouble after all did I take? When I found Cytherea would not stay with me after the wedding I was much put out at being left alone again. Was that unnatural?’

‘No.’

‘And those favouring accidents you mention — that nobody knew my first wife — seemed an arrangement of Providence for our mutual benefit, and merely perfected a half-formed impulse — that I should call you my first wife to escape the scandal that would have arisen if you had come here as anything else.’

‘My love, that story won’t do. If Mrs. Manston was burnt, Cytherea, whom you love better than me, could have been compelled to live with you as your lawful wife. If she was not burnt, why should you run the risk of her turning up again at any moment and exposing your substitution of me, and ruining your name and prospects?’

‘Why — because I might have loved you well enough to run the risk (assuming her not to be burnt, which I deny).’

‘No — you would have run the risk the other way. You would rather have risked her finding you with Cytherea as a second wife, than with me as a personator of herself — the first one.’

‘You came easiest to hand — remember that.’

‘Not so very easy either, considering the labour you took to teach me your first wife’s history. All about how she was a native of Philadelphia. Then making me read up the guide-book to Philadelphia, and details of American life and manners, in case the birthplace and history of your wife, Eunice, should ever become known in this neighbourhood — unlikely as it was. Ah! and then about the handwriting of hers that I had to imitate, and the dying my hair, and rouging, to make the transformation complete? You mean to say that that was taking less trouble than there would have been in arranging events to make Cytherea believe herself your wife, and live with you?’

‘You were a needy adventuress, who would dare anything for a new pleasure and an easy life — and I was fool enough to give in to you — ’

‘Good heavens above! — did I ask you to insert those advertisements for your old wife, and to make me answer it as if I was she? Did I ask you to send me the letter for me to copy and send back to you when the third advertisement appeared — purporting to come from the long-lost wife, and giving a detailed history of her escape and subsequent life — all which you had invented yourself? You deluded me into loving you, and then enticed me here! Ah, and this is another thing. How did you know the real wife wouldn’t answer it, and upset all your plans?’

‘Because I knew she was burnt.’

‘Why didn’t you force Cytherea to come back, then? Now, my love, I have caught you, and you may just as well tell first as last, what was your motive in having me here as your first wife?’

‘Silence!’ he exclaimed.

She was silent for the space of two minutes, and then persisted in going on to mutter, ‘And why was it that Miss Aldclyffe allowed her favourite young lady, Cythie, to be overthrown and supplanted without an expostulation or any show of sympathy? Do you know I often think you exercise a secret power over Miss Aldclyffe. And she always shuns me as if I shared the power. A poor, ill-used creature like me sharing power, indeed!’

‘She thinks you are Mrs. Manston.’

‘That wouldn’t make her avoid me.’

‘Yes it would,’ he exclaimed impatiently. ‘I wish I was dead — dead!’ He had jumped up from his seat in uttering the words, and now walked wearily to the end of the room. Coming back more decisively, he looked in her face.

‘We must leave this place if Raunham suspects what I think he does,’ he said. ‘The request of Cytherea and her brother may simply be for a satisfactory proof, to make her feel legally free — but it may mean more.’

‘What may it mean?’

‘How should I know?’

‘Well, well, never mind, old boy,’ she said, approaching him to make up the quarrel. ‘Don’t be so alarmed — anybody would think that you were the woman and I the man. Suppose they do find out what I am — we can go away from here and keep house

as usual. People will say of you, "His first wife was burnt to death" (or "ran away to the Colonies," as the case may be); "He married a second, and deserted her for Anne Seaway." A very everyday case — nothing so horrible, after all.'

He made an impatient movement. 'Whichever way we do it, nobody must know that you are not my wife Eunice. And now I must think about arranging matters.'

Manston then retired to his office, and shut himself up for the remainder of the evening.

XIX. THE EVENTS OF A DAY AND NIGHT

1. MARCH THE TWENTY-FIRST. MORNING

Next morning the steward went out as usual. He shortly told his companion, Anne, that he had almost matured their scheme, and that they would enter upon the details of it when he came home at night. The fortunate fact that the rector's letter did not require an immediate answer would give him time to consider.

Anne Seaway then began her duties in the house. Besides daily superintending the cook and housemaid one of these duties was, at rare intervals, to dust Manston's office with her own hands, a servant being supposed to disturb the books and papers unnecessarily. She softly wandered from table to shelf with the duster in her hand, afterwards standing in the middle of the room, and glancing around to discover if any noteworthy collection of dust had still escaped her.

Her eye fell upon a faint layer which rested upon the ledge of an old-fashioned chestnut cabinet of French Renaissance workmanship, placed in a recess by the fireplace. At a height of about four feet from the floor the upper portion of the front receded, forming the ledge alluded to, on which opened at each end two small doors, the centre space between them being filled out by a panel of similar size, making the third of three squares. The dust on the ledge was nearly on a level with the woman's eye, and, though insignificant in quantity, showed itself distinctly on account of this obliquity of vision. Now opposite the central panel, concentric quarter-circles were traced in the deposited film, expressing to her that this panel, too, was a door like the others; that it had lately been opened, and had skimmed the dust with its lower edge.

At last, then, her curiosity was slightly rewarded. For the right of the matter was that Anne had been incited to this exploration of Manston's office rather by a wish to know the reason of his long seclusion here, after the arrival of the rector's letter, and their subsequent discourse, than by any immediate desire for cleanliness. Still, there would have been nothing remarkable to Anne in this sight but for one recollection. Manston had once casually told her that each of the two side-lockers included half the middle space, the panel of which did not open, and was only put in for symmetry. It was possible that he had opened this compartment by candlelight the preceding night, or he would have seen the marks in the dust, and effaced them, that he might not be proved guilty of telling her an untruth. She balanced herself on one foot and stood

pondering. She considered that it was very vexing and unfair in him to refuse her all knowledge of his remaining secrets, under the peculiar circumstances of her connection with him. She went close to the cabinet. As there was no keyhole, the door must be capable of being opened by the unassisted hand. The circles in the dust told her at which edge to apply her force. Here she pulled with the tips of her fingers, but the panel would not come forward. She fetched a chair and looked over the top of the cabinet, but no bolt, knob, or spring was to be seen.

‘O, never mind,’ she said, with indifference; ‘I’ll ask him about it, and he will tell me.’ Down she came and turned away. Then looking back again she thought it was absurd such a trifle should puzzle her. She retraced her steps, and opened a drawer beneath the ledge of the cabinet, pushing in her hand and feeling about on the underside of the board.

Here she found a small round sinking, and pressed her finger into it. Nothing came of the pressure. She withdrew her hand and looked at the tip of her finger: it was marked with the impress of the circle, and, in addition, a line ran across it diametrically.

‘How stupid of me; it is the head of a screw.’ Whatever mysterious contrivance had originally existed for opening the puny cupboard of the cabinet, it had at some time been broken, and this rough substitute provided. Stimulated curiosity would not allow her to recede now. She fetched a screwdriver, withdrew the screw, pulled the door open with a penknife, and found inside a cavity about ten inches square. The cavity contained —

Letters from different women, with unknown signatures, Christian names only (surnames being despised in Paphos). Letters from his wife Eunice. Letters from Anne herself, including that she wrote in answer to his advertisement. A small pocket-book. Sundry scraps of paper.

The letters from the strange women with pet names she glanced carelessly through, and then put them aside. They were too similar to her own regretted delusion, and curiosity requires contrast to excite it.

The letters from his wife were next examined. They were dated back as far as Eunice’s first meeting with Manston, and the early ones before their marriage contained the usual pretty effusions of women at such a period of their existence. Some little time after he had made her his wife, and when he had come to Knapwater, the series began again, and now their contents arrested her attention more forcibly. She closed the cabinet, carried the letters into the parlour, reclined herself on the sofa, and carefully perused them in the order of their dates.

‘JOHN STREET,
October 17, 1864.

‘MY DEAREST HUSBAND, — I received your hurried line of yesterday, and was of course content with it. But why don’t you tell me your exact address instead of that “Post-Office, Budmouth?” This matter is all a mystery to me, and I ought to be told every detail. I cannot fancy it is the same kind of occupation you have been used to hitherto. Your command that I am to stay here awhile until you can “see how things

look” and can arrange to send for me, I must necessarily abide by. But if, as you say, a married man would have been rejected by the person who engaged you, and that hence my existence must be kept a secret until you have secured your position, why did you think of going at all?

‘The truth is, this keeping our marriage a secret is troublesome, vexing, and wearisome to me. I see the poorest woman in the street bearing her husband’s name openly — living with him in the most matter-of-fact ease, and why shouldn’t I? I wish I was back again in Liverpool.

‘To-day I bought a grey waterproof cloak. I think it is a little too long for me, but it was cheap for one of such a quality. The weather is gusty and dreary, and till this morning I had hardly set foot outside the door since you left. Please do tell me when I am to come. — Very affectionately yours, EUNICE.’

‘JOHN STREET,
October 25, 1864.

‘MY DEAR HUSBAND, — Why don’t you write? Do you hate me? I have not had the heart to do anything this last week. That I, your wife, should be in this strait, and my husband well to do! I have been obliged to leave my first lodging for debt — among other things, they charged me for a lot of brandy which I am quite sure I did not taste. Then I went to Camberwell and was found out by them. I went away privately from thence, and changed my name the second time. I am now Mrs. Rondley. But the new lodging was the wretchedest and dearest I ever set foot in, and I left it after being there only a day. I am now at No. 20 in the same street that you left me in originally. All last night the sash of my window rattled so dreadfully that I could not sleep, but I had not energy enough to get out of bed to stop it. This morning I have been walking — I don’t know how far — but far enough to make my feet ache. I have been looking at the outside of two or three of the theatres, but they seem forbidding if I regard them with the eye of an actress in search of an engagement. Though you said I was to think no more of the stage, I believe you would not care if you found me there. But I am not an actress by nature, and art will never make me one. I am too timid and retiring; I was intended for a cottager’s wife. I certainly shall not try to go on the boards again whilst I am in this strange place. The idea of being brought on as far as London and then left here alone! Why didn’t you leave me in Liverpool? Perhaps you thought I might have told somebody that my real name was Mrs. Manston. As if I had a living friend to whom I could impart it — no such good fortune! In fact, my nearest friend is no nearer than what most people would call a stranger. But perhaps I ought to tell you that a week before I wrote my last letter to you, after wishing that my uncle and aunt in Philadelphia (the only near relatives I had) were still alive, I suddenly resolved to send a line to my cousin James, who, I believe, is still living in that neighbourhood. He has never seen me since we were babies together. I did not tell him of my marriage, because I thought you might not like it, and I gave my real maiden name, and an address at the post-office here. But God knows if the letter will ever reach him.

‘Do write me an answer, and send something. — Your affectionate wife, EUNICE.’
‘FRIDAY, October 28.

‘MY DEAR HUSBAND, — The order for ten pounds has just come, and I am truly glad to get it. But why will you write so bitterly? Ah — well, if I had only had the money I should have been on my way to America by this time, so don’t think I want to bore you of my own free-will. Who can you have met with at that new place? Remember I say this in no malignant tone, but certainly the facts go to prove that you have deserted me! You are inconstant — I know it. O, why are you so? Now I have lost you, I love you in spite of your neglect. I am weakly fond — that’s my nature. I fear that upon the whole my life has been wasted. I know there is another woman supplanting me in your heart — yes, I know it. Come to me — do come. EUNICE.’

‘41 CHARLES SQUARE, HOXTON,
November 19.

‘DEAR AENEAS, — Here I am back again after my visit. Why should you have been so enraged at my finding your exact address? Any woman would have tried to do it — you know she would have. And no woman would have lived under assumed names so long as I did. I repeat that I did not call myself Mrs. Manston until I came to this lodging at the beginning of this month — what could you expect?

‘A helpless creature I, had not fortune favoured me unexpectedly. Banished as I was from your house at dawn, I did not suppose the indignity was about to lead to important results. But in crossing the park I overheard the conversation of a young man and woman who had also risen early. I believe her to be the girl who has won you away from me. Well, their conversation concerned you and Miss Aldclyffe, very peculiarly. The remarkable thing is that you yourself, without knowing it, told me of what, added to their conversation, completely reveals a secret to me that neither of you understand. Two negatives never made such a telling positive before. One clue more, and you would see it. A single consideration prevents my revealing it — just one doubt as to whether your ignorance was real, and was not feigned to deceive me. Civility now, please. EUNICE.’

‘41 CHARLES SQUARE,
Tuesday, November 22.

‘MY DARLING HUSBAND, — Monday will suit me excellently for coming. I have acted exactly up to your instructions, and have sold my rubbish at the broker’s in the next street. All this movement and bustle is delightful to me after the weeks of monotony I have endured. It is a relief to wish the place good-bye — London always has seemed so much more foreign to me than Liverpool. The mid-day train on Monday will do nicely for me. I shall be anxiously looking out for you on Sunday night.

‘I hope so much that you are not angry with me for writing to Miss Aldclyffe. You are not, dear, are you? Forgive me. — Your loving wife, EUNICE.’

This was the last of the letters from the wife to the husband. One other, in Mrs. Manston’s handwriting, and in the same packet, was differently addressed.

‘THREE TRANTERS INN, CARRIFORD,

November 28, 1864.

‘DEAR COUSIN JAMES, — Thank you indeed for answering my letter so promptly. When I called at the post-office yesterday I did not in the least think there would be one. But I must leave this subject. I write again at once under the strangest and saddest conditions it is possible to conceive.

‘I did not tell you in my last that I was a married woman. Don’t blame me — it was my husband’s influence. I hardly know where to begin my story. I had been living apart from him for a time — then he sent for me (this was last week) and I was glad to go to him. Then this is what he did. He promised to fetch me, and did not — leaving me to do the journey alone. He promised to meet me at the station here — he did not. I went on through the darkness to his house, and found his door locked and himself away from home. I have been obliged to come here, and I write to you in a strange room in a strange village inn! I choose the present moment to write to drive away my misery. Sorrow seems a sort of pleasure when you detail it on paper — poor pleasure though.

‘But this is what I want to know — and I am ashamed to tell it. I would gladly do as you say, and come to you as a housekeeper, but I have not the money even for a steerage passage. James, do you want me badly enough — do you pity me enough to send it? I could manage to subsist in London upon the proceeds of my sale for another month or six weeks. Will you send it to the same address at the post-office? But how do I know that you...’

Thus the letter ended. From creases in the paper it was plain that the writer, having got so far, had become dissatisfied with her production, and had crumpled it in her hand. Was it to write another, or not to write at all?

The next thing Anne Seaway perceived was that the fragmentary story she had coaxed out of Manston, to the effect that his wife had left England for America, might be truthful, according to two of these letters, corroborated by the evidence of the railway-porter. And yet, at first, he had sworn in a passion that his wife was most certainly consumed in the fire.

If she had been burnt, this letter, written in her bedroom, and probably thrust into her pocket when she relinquished it, would have been burnt with her. Nothing was surer than that. Why, then, did he say she was burnt, and never show Anne herself this letter?

The question suddenly raised a new and much stranger one — kindling a burst of amazement in her. How did Manston become possessed of this letter?

That fact of possession was certainly the most remarkable revelation of all in connection with this epistle, and perhaps had something to do with his reason for never showing it to her.

She knew by several proofs, that before his marriage with Cytherea, and up to the time of the porter’s confession, Manston believed — honestly believed — that Cytherea would be his lawful wife, and hence, of course, that his wife Eunice was dead. So that no communication could possibly have passed between his wife and himself from the first

moment that he believed her dead on the night of the fire, to the day of his wedding. And yet he had that letter. How soon afterwards could they have communicated with each other?

The existence of the letter — as much as, or more than its contents — implying that Mrs. Manston was not burnt, his belief in that calamity must have terminated at the moment he obtained possession of the letter, if no earlier. Was, then, the only solution to the riddle that Anne could discern, the true one? — that he had communicated with his wife somewhere about the commencement of Anne's residence with him, or at any time since?

It was the most unlikely thing on earth that a woman who had forsaken her husband should countenance his scheme to personify her — whether she were in America, in London, or in the neighbourhood of Knapwater.

Then came the old and harassing question, what was Manston's real motive in risking his name on the deception he was practising as regarded Anne. It could not be, as he had always pretended, mere passion. Her thoughts had reverted to Mr. Raunham's letter, asking for proofs of her identity with the original Mrs. Manston. She could see no loophole of escape for the man who supported her. True, in her own estimation, his worst alternative was not so very bad after all — the getting the name of libertine, a possible appearance in the divorce or some other court of law, and a question of damages. Such an exposure might hinder his worldly progress for some time. Yet to him this alternative was, apparently, terrible as death itself.

She restored the letters to their hiding-place, scanned anew the other letters and memoranda, from which she could gain no fresh information, fastened up the cabinet, and left everything in its former condition.

Her mind was ill at ease. More than ever she wished that she had never seen Manston. Where the person suspected of mysterious moral obliquity is the possessor of great physical and intellectual attractions, the mere sense of incongruity adds an extra shudder to dread. The man's strange bearing terrified Anne as it had terrified Cytherea; for with all the woman Anne's faults, she had not descended to such depths of depravity as to willingly participate in crime. She had not even known that a living wife was being displaced till her arrival at Knapwater put retreat out of the question, and had looked upon personation simply as a mode of subsistence a degree better than toiling in poverty and alone, after a bustling and somewhat pampered life as housekeeper in a gay mansion.

*'Non illa colo calathisve Minervae
Foemineas assueta manus.'*

2. AFTERNOON

Mr. Raunham and Edward Springrove had by this time set in motion a machinery which they hoped to find working out important results.

The rector was restless and full of meditation all the following morning. It was plain, even to the servants about him, that Springrove's communication wore a deeper complexion than any that had been made to the old magistrate for many months or

years past. The fact was that, having arrived at the stage of existence in which the difficult intellectual feat of suspending one's judgment becomes possible, he was now putting it in practice, though not without the penalty of watchful effort.

It was not till the afternoon that he determined to call on his relative, Miss Aldclyffe, and cautiously probe her knowledge of the subject occupying him so thoroughly. Cytherea, he knew, was still beloved by this solitary woman. Miss Aldclyffe had made several private inquiries concerning her former companion, and there was ever a sadness in her tone when the young lady's name was mentioned, which showed that from whatever cause the elder Cytherea's renunciation of her favourite and namesake proceeded, it was not from indifference to her fate.

'Have you ever had any reason for supposing your steward anything but an upright man?' he said to the lady.

'Never the slightest. Have you?' said she reservedly.

'Well — I have.'

'What is it?'

'I can say nothing plainly, because nothing is proved. But my suspicions are very strong.'

'Do you mean that he was rather cool towards his wife when they were first married, and that it was unfair in him to leave her? I know he was; but I think his recent conduct towards her has amply atoned for the neglect.'

He looked Miss Aldclyffe full in the face. It was plain that she spoke honestly. She had not the slightest notion that the woman who lived with the steward might be other than Mrs. Manston — much less that a greater matter might be behind.

'That's not it — I wish it was no more. My suspicion is, first, that the woman living at the Old House is not Mr. Manston's wife.'

'Not — Mr. Manston's wife?'

'That is it.'

Miss Aldclyffe looked blankly at the rector. 'Not Mr. Manston's wife — who else can she be?' she said simply.

'An improper woman of the name of Anne Seaway.'

Mr. Raunham had, in common with other people, noticed the extraordinary interest of Miss Aldclyffe in the well-being of her steward, and had endeavoured to account for it in various ways. The extent to which she was shaken by his information, whilst it proved that the understanding between herself and Manston did not make her a sharer of his secrets, also showed that the tie which bound her to him was still unbroken. Mr. Raunham had lately begun to doubt the latter fact, and now, on finding himself mistaken, regretted that he had not kept his own counsel in the matter. This it was too late to do, and he pushed on with his proofs. He gave Miss Aldclyffe in detail the grounds of his belief.

Before he had done, she recovered the cloak of reserve that she had adopted on his opening the subject.

‘I might possibly be convinced that you were in the right, after such an elaborate argument,’ she replied, ‘were it not for one fact, which bears in the contrary direction so pointedly, that nothing but absolute proof can turn it. It is that there is no conceivable motive which could induce any sane man — leaving alone a man of Mr. Manston’s clear-headedness and integrity — to venture upon such an extraordinary course of conduct — no motive on earth.’

‘That was my own opinion till after the visit of a friend last night — a friend of mine and poor little Cytherea’s.’

‘Ah — and Cytherea,’ said Miss Aldclyffe, catching at the idea raised by the name. ‘That he loved Cytherea — yes and loves her now, wildly and devotedly, I am as positive as that I breathe. Cytherea is years younger than Mrs. Manston — as I shall call her — twice as sweet in disposition, three times as beautiful. Would he have given her up quietly and suddenly for a common — Mr. Raunham, your story is monstrous, and I don’t believe it!’ She glowed in her earnestness.

The rector might now have advanced his second proposition — the possible motive — but for reasons of his own he did not.

‘Very well, madam. I only hope that facts will sustain you in your belief. Ask him the question to his face, whether the woman is his wife or no, and see how he receives it.’

‘I will to-morrow, most certainly,’ she said. ‘I always let these things die of wholesome ventilation, as every fungus does.’

But no sooner had the rector left her presence, than the grain of mustard-seed he had sown grew to a tree. Her impatience to set her mind at rest could not brook a night’s delay. It was with the utmost difficulty that she could wait till evening arrived to screen her movements. Immediately the sun had dropped behind the horizon, and before it was quite dark, she wrapped her cloak around her, softly left the house, and walked erect through the gloomy park in the direction of the old manor-house.

The same minute saw two persons sit down in the rectory-house to share the rector’s usually solitary dinner. One was a man of official appearance, commonplace in all except his eyes. The other was Edward Springrove.

The discovery of the carefully-concealed letters rankled in the mind of Anne Seaway. Her woman’s nature insisted that Manston had no right to keep all matters connected with his lost wife a secret from herself. Perplexity had bred vexation; vexation, resentment; curiosity had been continuous. The whole morning this resentment and curiosity increased.

The steward said very little to his companion during their luncheon at mid-day. He seemed reckless of appearances — almost indifferent to whatever fate awaited him. All his actions betrayed that something portentous was impending, and still he explained nothing. By carefully observing every trifling action, as only a woman can observe them, the thought at length dawned upon her that he was going to run away secretly. She feared for herself; her knowledge of law and justice was vague, and she fancied she might in some way be made responsible for him.

In the afternoon he went out of the house again, and she watched him drive away in the direction of the county-town. She felt a desire to go there herself, and, after an interval of half-an-hour, followed him on foot notwithstanding the distance — ostensibly to do some shopping.

One among her several trivial errands was to make a small purchase at the druggist's. Near the druggist's stood the County Bank. Looking out of the shop window, between the coloured bottles, she saw Manston come down the steps of the bank, in the act of withdrawing his hand from his pocket, and pulling his coat close over its mouth.

It is an almost universal habit with people, when leaving a bank, to be carefully adjusting their pockets if they have been receiving money; if they have been paying it in, their hands swing laxly. The steward had in all likelihood been taking money — possibly on Miss Aldclyffe's account — that was continual with him. And he might have been removing his own, as a man would do who was intending to leave the country.

3. FROM FIVE TO EIGHT O'CLOCK P.M.

Anne reached home again in time to preside over preparations for dinner. Manston came in half-an-hour later. The lamp was lighted, the shutters were closed, and they sat down together. He was pale and worn — almost haggard.

The meal passed off in almost unbroken silence. When preoccupation withstands the influence of a social meal with one pleasant companion, the mental scene must be surpassingly vivid. Just as she was rising a tap came to the door.

Before a maid could attend to the knock, Manston crossed the room and answered it himself. The visitor was Miss Aldclyffe.

Manston instantly came back and spoke to Anne in an undertone. 'I should be glad if you could retire to your room for a short time.'

'It is a dry, starlight evening,' she replied. 'I will go for a little walk if your object is merely a private conversation with Miss Aldclyffe.'

'Very well, do; there's no accounting for tastes,' he said. A few commonplaces then passed between her and Miss Aldclyffe, and Anne went upstairs to bonnet and cloak herself. She came down, opened the front door, and went out.

She looked around to realise the night. It was dark, mournful, and quiet. Then she stood still. From the moment that Manston had requested her absence, a strong and burning desire had prevailed in her to know the subject of Miss Aldclyffe's conversation with him. Simple curiosity was not entirely what inspired her. Her suspicions had been thoroughly aroused by the discovery of the morning. A conviction that her future depended on her power to combat a man who, in desperate circumstances, would be far from a friend to her, prompted a strategic movement to acquire the important secret that was in handling now. The woman thought and thought, and regarded the dull dark trees, anxiously debating how the thing could be done.

Stealthily re-opening the front door she entered the hall, and advancing and pausing alternately, came close to the door of the room in which Miss Aldclyffe and Manston conversed. Nothing could be heard through the keyhole or panels. At a great risk she softly turned the knob and opened the door to a width of about half-an-inch, perform-

ing the act so delicately that three minutes, at least, were occupied in completing it. At that instant Miss Aldclyffe said —

‘There’s a draught somewhere. The door is ajar, I think.’

Anne glided back under the staircase. Manston came forward and closed the door. This chance was now cut off, and she considered again. The parlour, or sitting-room, in which the conference took place, had the window-shutters fixed on the outside of the window, as is usual in the back portions of old country-houses. The shutters were hinged one on each side of the opening, and met in the middle, where they were fastened by a bolt passing continuously through them and the wood mullion within, the bolt being secured on the inside by a pin, which was seldom inserted till Manston and herself were about to retire for the night; sometimes not at all.

If she returned to the door of the room she might be discovered at any moment, but could she listen at the window, which overlooked a part of the garden never visited after nightfall, she would be safe from disturbance. The idea was worth a trial.

She glided round to the window, took the head of the bolt between her finger and thumb, and softly screwed it round until it was entirely withdrawn from its position. The shutters remained as before, whilst, where the bolt had come out, was now a shining hole three-quarters of an inch in diameter, through which one might see into the middle of the room. She applied her eye to the orifice.

Miss Aldclyffe and Manston were both standing; Manston with his back to the window, his companion facing it. The lady’s demeanour was severe, condemnatory, and haughty. No more was to be seen; Anne then turned sideways, leant with her shoulder against the shutters and placed her ear upon the hole.

‘You know where,’ said Miss Aldclyffe. ‘And how could you, a man, act a double deceit like this?’

‘Men do strange things sometimes.’

‘What was your reason — come?’

‘A mere whim.’

‘I might even believe that, if the woman were handsomer than Cytherea, or if you had been married some time to Cytherea and had grown tired of her.’

‘And can’t you believe it, too, under these conditions; that I married Cytherea, gave her up because I heard that my wife was alive, found that my wife would not come to live with me, and then, not to let any woman I love so well as Cytherea run any risk of being displaced and ruined in reputation, should my wife ever think fit to return, induced this woman to come to me, as being better than no companion at all?’

‘I cannot believe it. Your love for Cytherea was not of such a kind as that excuse would imply. It was Cytherea or nobody with you. As an object of passion, you did not desire the company of this Anne Seaway at all, and certainly not so much as to madly risk your reputation by bringing her here in the way you have done. I am sure you didn’t, AEneas.’

‘So am I,’ he said bluntly.

Miss Aldclyffe uttered an exclamation of astonishment; the confession was like a blow in its suddenness. She began to reproach him bitterly, and with tears.

‘How could you overthrow my plans, disgrace the only girl I ever had any respect for, by such inexplicable doings!... That woman must leave this place — the country perhaps. Heavens! the truth will leak out in a day or two!’

‘She must do no such thing, and the truth must be stifled somehow — nobody knows how. If I stay here, or on any spot of the civilized globe, as AENEAS Manston, this woman must live with me as my wife, or I am damned past redemption!’

‘I will not countenance your keeping her, whatever your motive may be.’

‘You must do something,’ he murmured. ‘You must. Yes, you must.’

‘I never will,’ she said. ‘It is a criminal act.’

He looked at her earnestly. ‘Will you not support me through this deception if my very life depends upon it? Will you not?’

‘Nonsense! Life! It will be a scandal to you, but she must leave this place. It will out sooner or later, and the exposure had better come now.’

Manston repeated gloomily the same words. ‘My life depends upon your supporting me — my very life.’

He then came close to her, and spoke into her ear. Whilst he spoke he held her head to his mouth with both his hands. Strange expressions came over her face; the workings of her mouth were painful to observe. Still he held her and whispered on.

The only words that could be caught by Anne Seaway, confused as her hearing frequently was by the moan of the wind and the waterfall in her outer ear, were these of Miss Aldclyffe, in tones which absolutely quivered: ‘They have no money. What can they prove?’

The listener tasked herself to the utmost to catch his answer, but it was in vain. Of the remainder of the colloquy one fact alone was plain to Anne, and that only inductively — that Miss Aldclyffe, from what he had revealed to her, was going to scheme body and soul on Manston’s behalf.

Miss Aldclyffe seemed now to have no further reason for remaining, yet she lingered awhile as if loth to leave him. When, finally, the crestfallen and agitated lady made preparations for departure, Anne quickly inserted the bolt, ran round to the entrance archway, and down the steps into the park. Here she stood close to the trunk of a huge lime-tree, which absorbed her dark outline into its own.

In a few minutes she saw Manston, with Miss Aldclyffe leaning on his arm, cross the glade before her and proceed in the direction of the house. She watched them ascend the rise and advance, as two black spots, towards the mansion. The appearance of an oblong space of light in the dark mass of walls denoted that the door was opened. Miss Aldclyffe’s outline became visible upon it; the door shut her in, and all was darkness again. The form of Manston returning alone arose from the gloom, and passed by Anne in her hiding-place.

Waiting outside a quarter of an hour longer, that no suspicion of any kind might be excited, Anne returned to the old manor-house.

4. FROM EIGHT TO ELEVEN O'CLOCK P.M.

Manston was very friendly that evening. It was evident to her, now that she was behind the scenes, that he was making desperate efforts to disguise the real state of his mind.

Her terror of him did not decrease. They sat down to supper, Manston still talking cheerfully. But what is keener than the eye of a mistrustful woman? A man's cunning is to it as was the armour of Sisera to the thin tent-nail. She found, in spite of his adroitness, that he was attempting something more than a disguise of his feeling. He was trying to distract her attention, that he might be unobserved in some special movement of his hands.

What a moment it was for her then! The whole surface of her body became attentive. She allowed him no chance whatever. We know the duplicated condition at such times — when the existence divides itself into two, and the ostensibly innocent chatterer stands in front, like another person, to hide the timorous spy.

Manston played the same game, but more palpably. The meal was nearly over when he seemed possessed of a new idea of how his object might be accomplished. He tilted back his chair with a reflective air, and looked steadily at the clock standing against the wall opposite to him. He said sententiously, 'Few faces are capable of expressing more by dumb show than the face of a clock. You may see in it every variety of incentive — from the softest seductions to negligence to the strongest hints for action.'

'Well, in what way?' she inquired. His drift was, as yet, quite unintelligible to her.

'Why, for instance: look at the cold, methodical, unromantic, business-like air of all the right-angled positions of the hands. They make a man set about work in spite of himself. Then look at the piquant shyness of its face when the two hands are over each other. Several attitudes imply "Make ready." The "make ready" of ten minutes to one differs from the "make ready" of ten minutes to twelve, as youth differs from age. "Upward and onward" says twenty-five minutes to eleven. Mid-day or midnight expresses distinctly "It is done." You surely have noticed that?'

'Yes, I have.'

He continued with affected quaintness: —

'The easy dash of ten minutes past seven, the rakish recklessness of a quarter past, the drooping weariness of twenty-five minutes past, must have been observed by everybody.'

'Whatever amount of truth there may be, there is a good deal of imagination in your fancy,' she said.

He still contemplated the clock.

'Then, again, the general finish of the face has a great effect upon the eye. This old-fashioned brass-faced one we have here, with its arched top, half-moon slit for the day of the month, and ship rocking at the upper part, impresses me with the notion of its being an old cynic, elevating his brows, whose thoughts can be seen wavering between good and evil.'

A thought now enlightened her: the clock was behind her, and he wanted to get her back turned. She dreaded turning, yet, not to excite his suspicion, she was on her guard; she quickly looked behind her at the clock as he spoke, recovering her old position again instantly. The time had not been long enough for any action whatever on his part.

‘Ah,’ he casually remarked, and at the same minute began to pour her out a glass of wine. ‘Speaking of the clock has reminded me that it must nearly want winding up. Remember that it is wound to-night. Suppose you do it at once, my dear.’

There was no possible way of evading the act. She resolutely turned to perform the operation: anything was better than that he should suspect her. It was an old-fashioned eight-day clock, of workmanship suited to the rest of the antique furniture that Manston had collected there, and ground heavily during winding.

Anne had given up all idea of being able to watch him during the interval, and the noise of the wheels prevented her learning anything by her ears. But, as she wound, she caught sight of his shadow on the wall at her right hand.

What was he doing? He was in the very act of pouring something into her glass of wine.

He had completed the manoeuvre before she had done winding. She methodically closed the clock-case and turned round again. When she faced him he was sitting in his chair as before she had risen.

In a familiar scene which has hitherto been pleasant it is difficult to realise that an added condition, which does not alter its aspect, can have made it terrible. The woman thought that his action must have been prompted by no other intent than that of poisoning her, and yet she could not instantly put on a fear of her position.

And before she had grasped these consequences, another supposition served to make her regard the first as unlikely, if not absurd. It was the act of a madman to take her life in a manner so easy of discovery, unless there were far more reason for the crime than any that Manston could possibly have.

Was it not merely his intention, in tampering with her wine, to make her sleep soundly that night? This was in harmony with her original suspicion, that he intended secretly to abscond. At any rate, he was going to set about some stealthy proceeding, as to which she was to be kept in utter darkness. The difficulty now was to avoid drinking the wine.

By means of one pretext and another she put off taking her glass for nearly five minutes, but he eyed her too frequently to allow her to throw the potion under the grate. It became necessary to take one sip. This she did, and found an opportunity of absorbing it in her handkerchief.

Plainly he had no idea of her countermoves. The scheme seemed to him in proper train, and he turned to poke out the fire. She instantly seized the glass, and poured its contents down her bosom. When he faced round again she was holding the glass to her lips, empty.

In due course he locked the doors and saw that the shutters were fastened. She attended to a few closing details of housewifery, and a few minutes later they retired for the night.

5. FROM ELEVEN O'CLOCK TO MIDNIGHT

When Manston was persuaded, by the feigned heaviness of her breathing, that Anne Seaway was asleep, he softly arose, and dressed himself in the gloom. With ears strained to their utmost she heard him complete this operation; then he took something from his pocket, put it in the drawer of the dressing-table, went to the door, and down the stairs. She glided out of bed and looked in the drawer. He had only restored to its place a small phial she had seen there before. It was labelled 'Battley's Solution of Opium.' She felt relieved that her life had not been attempted. That was to have been her sleeping-draught. No time was to be lost if she meant to be a match for him. She followed him in her nightdress. When she reached the foot of the staircase he was in the office and had closed the door, under which a faint gleam showed that he had obtained a light. She crept to the door, but could not venture to open it, however slightly. Placing her ear to the panel, she could hear him tearing up papers of some sort, and a brighter and quivering ray of light coming from the threshold an instant later, implied that he was burning them. By the slight noise of his footsteps on the uncarpeted floor, she at length imagined that he was approaching the door. She flitted upstairs again and crept into bed.

Manston returned to the bedroom close upon her heels, and entered it — again without a light. Standing motionless for an instant to assure himself that she still slept, he went to the drawer in which their ready-money was kept, and removed the casket that contained it. Anne's ear distinctly caught the rustle of notes, and the chink of the gold as he handled it. Some he placed in his pocket, some he returned to its place. He stood thinking, as it were weighing a possibility. While lingering thus, he noticed the reflected image of his own face in the glass — pale and spectre-like in its indistinctness. The sight seemed to be the feather which turned the balance of indecision: he drew a heavy breath, retired from the room, and passed downstairs. She heard him unbar the back-door, and go out into the yard.

Feeling safe in a conclusion that he did not intend to return to the bedroom again, she arose, and hastily dressed herself. On going to the door of the apartment she found that he had locked it behind him. 'A precaution — it can be no more,' she muttered. Yet she was all the more perplexed and excited on this account. Had he been going to leave home immediately, he would scarcely have taken the trouble to lock her in, holding the belief that she was in a drugged sleep. The lock shot into a mortice, so that there was no possibility of her pushing back the bolt. How should she follow him? Easily. An inner closet opened from the bedroom: it was large, and had some time heretofore been used as a dressing or bath room, but had been found inconvenient from having no other outlet to the landing. The window of this little room looked out upon the roof of the porch, which was flat and covered with lead. Anne took a pillow from the bed, gently opened the casement of the inner room and stepped forth on the

flat. There, leaning over the edge of the small parapet that ornamented the porch, she dropped the pillow upon the gravel path, and let herself down over the parapet by her hands till her toes swung about two feet from the ground. From this position she adroitly alighted upon the pillow, and stood in the path.

Since she had come indoors from her walk in the early part of the evening the moon had risen. But the thick clouds overspreading the whole landscape rendered the dim light pervasive and grey: it appeared as an attribute of the air. Anne crept round to the back of the house, listening intently. The steward had had at least ten minutes' start of her. She had waited here whilst one might count fifty, when she heard a movement in the outhouse — a fragment once attached to the main building. This outhouse was partitioned into an outer and an inner room, which had been a kitchen and a scullery before the connecting erections were pulled down, but they were now used respectively as a brewhouse and workshop, the only means of access to the latter being through the brewhouse. The outer door of this first apartment was usually fastened by a padlock on the exterior. It was now closed, but not fastened. Manston was evidently in the outhouse.

She slightly moved the door. The interior of the brewhouse was wrapped in gloom, but a streak of light fell towards her in a line across the floor from the inner or workshop door, which was not quite closed. This light was unexpected, none having been visible through hole or crevice. Glancing in, the woman found that he had placed cloths and mats at the various apertures, and hung a sack at the window to prevent the egress of a single ray. She could also perceive from where she stood that the bar of light fell across the brewing-copper just outside the inner door, and that upon it lay the key of her bedroom. The illuminated interior of the workshop was also partly visible from her position through the two half-open doors. Manston was engaged in emptying a large cupboard of the tools, gallipots, and old iron it contained. When it was quite cleared he took a chisel, and with it began to withdraw the hooks and shoulder-nails holding the cupboard to the wall. All these being loosened, he extended his arms, lifted the cupboard bodily from the brackets under it, and deposited it on the floor beside him.

That portion of the wall which had been screened by the cupboard was now laid bare. This, it appeared, had been plastered more recently than the bulk of the outhouse. Manston loosened the plaster with some kind of tool, flinging the pieces into a basket as they fell. Having now stripped clear about two feet area of wall, he inserted a crowbar between the joints of the bricks beneath, softly wriggling it until several were loosened. There was now disclosed the mouth of an old oven, which was apparently contrived in the thickness of the wall, and having fallen into disuse, had been closed up with bricks in this manner. It was formed after the simple old-fashioned plan of oven-building — a mere oblate cavity without a flue.

Manston now stretched his arm into the oven, dragged forth a heavy weight of great bulk, and let it slide to the ground. The woman who watched him could see the object plainly. It was a common corn-sack, nearly full, and was tied at the mouth in the usual way.

The steward had once or twice started up, as if he had heard sounds, and his motions now became more cat-like still. On a sudden he put out the light. Anne had made no noise, yet a foreign noise of some kind had certainly been made in the intervening portion of the house. She heard it. 'One of the rats,' she thought.

He seemed soon to recover from his alarm, but changed his tactics completely. He did not light his candle — going on with his work in the dark. She had only sounds to go by now, and, judging as well as she could from these, he was piling up the bricks which closed the oven's mouth as they had been before he disturbed them. The query that had not left her brain all the interval of her inspection — how should she get back into her bedroom again? — now received a solution. Whilst he was replacing the cupboard, she would glide across the brewhouse, take the key from the top of the copper, run upstairs, unlock the door, and bring back the key again: if he returned to bed, which was unlikely, he would think the lock had failed to catch in the staple. This thought and intention, occupying such length of words, flashed upon her in an instant, and hardly disturbed her strong curiosity to stay and learn the meaning of his actions in the workshop.

Slipping sideways through the first door and closing it behind her, she advanced into the darkness towards the second, making every individual footfall with the greatest care, lest the fragments of rubbish on the floor should crackle beneath her tread. She soon stood close by the copper, and not more than a foot from the door of the room occupied by Manston himself, from which position she could distinctly hear him breathe between each exertion, although it was far too dark to discern anything of him.

To secure the key of her chamber was her first anxiety, and accordingly she cautiously reached out with her hand to where it lay. Instead of touching it, her fingers came in contact with the boot of a human being.

She drooped faint in a cold sweat. It was the foot either of a man or woman, standing on the brewing-copper where the key had lain. A warm foot, covered with a polished boot.

The startling discovery so terrified her that she could hardly repress a sound. She withdrew her hand with a motion like the flight of an arrow. Her touch was so light that the leather seemed to have been thick enough to keep the owner of the foot in entire ignorance of it, and the noise of Manston's scraping might have been quite sufficient to drown the slight rustle of her dress.

The person was obviously not the steward: he was still busy. It was somebody who, since the light had been extinguished, had taken advantage of the gloom, to come from some dark recess in the brewhouse and stand upon the brickwork of the copper. The fear which had at first paralyzed her lessened with the birth of a sense that fear now was utter failure: she was in a desperate position and must abide by the consequences. The motionless person on the copper was, equally with Manston, quite unconscious of her proximity, and she ventured to advance her hand again, feeling behind the feet, till

she found the key. On its return to her side, her finger-tip skimmed the lower verge of a trousers-leg.

It was a man, then, who stood there. To go to the door just at this time was impolitic, and she shrank back into an inner corner to wait. The comparative security from discovery that her new position ensured resuscitated reason a little, and empowered her to form some logical inferences: —

1. The man who stood on the copper had taken advantage of the darkness to get there, as she had to enter.

2. The man must have been hidden in the outhouse before she had reached the door.

3. He must be watching Manston with much calculation and system, and for purposes of his own.

She could now tell by the noises that Manston had completed his re-erection of the cupboard. She heard him replacing the articles it had contained — bottle by bottle, tool by tool — after which he came into the brewhouse, went to the window, and pulled down the cloths covering it; but the window being rather small, this unveiling scarcely relieved the darkness of the interior. He returned to the workshop, hoisted something to his back by a jerk, and felt about the room for some other article. Having found it, he emerged from the inner door, crossed the brewhouse, and went into the yard. Directly he stepped out she could see his outline by the light of the clouded and weakly moon. The sack was slung at his back, and in his hand he carried a spade.

Anne now waited in her corner in breathless suspense for the proceedings of the other man. In about half-a-minute she heard him descend from the copper, and then the square opening of the doorway showed the outline of this other watcher passing through it likewise. The form was that of a broad-shouldered man enveloped in a long coat. He vanished after the steward.

The woman vented a sigh of relief, and moved forward to follow. Simultaneously, she discovered that the watcher whose foot she had touched was, in his turn, watched and followed also.

It was by one of her own sex. Anne Seaway shrank backward again. The unknown woman came forward from the further side of the yard, and pondered awhile in hesitation. Tall, dark, and closely wrapped, she stood up from the earth like a cypress. She moved, crossed the yard without producing the slightest disturbance by her footsteps, and went in the direction the others had taken.

Anne waited yet another minute — then in her turn noiselessly followed the last woman.

But so impressed was she with the sensation of people in hiding, that in coming out of the yard she turned her head to see if any person were following her, in the same way. Nobody was visible, but she discerned, standing behind the angle of the stable, Manston's horse and gig, ready harnessed.

He did intend to fly after all, then, she thought. He must have placed the horse in readiness, in the interval between his leaving the house and her exit by the window.

However, there was not time to weigh this branch of the night's events. She turned about again, and continued on the trail of the other three.

6. FROM MIDNIGHT TO HALF-PAST ONE A.M.

Intentness pervaded everything; Night herself seemed to have become a watcher.

The four persons proceeded across the glade, and into the park plantation, at equidistances of about seventy yards. Here the ground, completely overhung by the foliage, was coated with a thick moss which was as soft as velvet beneath their feet. The first watcher, that is, the man walking immediately behind Manston, now fell back, when Manston's housekeeper, knowing the ground pretty well, dived circuitously among the trees and got directly behind the steward, who, encumbered with his load, had proceeded but slowly. The other woman seemed now to be about opposite to Anne, or a little in advance, but on Manston's other hand.

He reached a pit, midway between the waterfall and the engine-house. There he stopped, wiped his face, and listened.

Into this pit had drifted uncounted generations of withered leaves, half filling it. Oak, beech, and chestnut, rotten and brown alike, mingled themselves in one fibrous mass. Manston descended into the midst of them, placed his sack on the ground, and raking the leaves aside into a large heap, began digging. Anne softly drew nearer, crept into a bush, and turning her head to survey the rest, missed the man who had dropped behind, and whom we have called the first watcher. Concluding that he, too, had hidden himself, she turned her attention to the second watcher, the other woman, who had meanwhile advanced near to where Anne lay in hiding, and now seated herself behind a tree, still closer to the steward than was Anne Seaway.

Here and thus Anne remained concealed. The crunch of the steward's spade, as it cut into the soft vegetable mould, was plainly perceptible to her ears when the periodic cessations between the creaks of the engine concurred with a lull in the breeze, which otherwise brought the subdued roar of the cascade from the further side of the bank that screened it. A large hole — some four or five feet deep — had been excavated by Manston in about twenty minutes. Into this he immediately placed the sack, and then began filling in the earth, and treading it down. Lastly he carefully raked the whole mass of dead and dry leaves into the middle of the pit, burying the ground with them as they had buried it before.

For a hiding-place the spot was unequalled. The thick accumulation of leaves, which had not been disturbed for centuries, might not be disturbed again for centuries to come, whilst their lower layers still decayed and added to the mould beneath.

By the time this work was ended the sky had grown clearer, and Anne could now see distinctly the face of the other woman, stretching from behind the tree, seemingly forgetful of her position in her intense contemplation of the actions of the steward. Her countenance was white and motionless.

It was impossible that Manston should not soon notice her. At the completion of his labour he turned, and did so.

'Ho — you here!' he exclaimed.

‘Don’t think I am a spy upon you,’ she said, in an imploring whisper. Anne recognized the voice as Miss Aldclyffe’s.

The trembling lady added hastily another remark, which was drowned in the recurring creak of the engine close at hand. The first watcher, if he had come no nearer than his original position, was too far off to hear any part of this dialogue, on account of the roar of the falling water, which could reach him unimpeded by the bank.

The remark of Miss Aldclyffe to Manston had plainly been concerning the first watcher, for Manston, with his spade in his hand, instantly rushed to where the man was concealed, and, before the latter could disengage himself from the boughs, the steward struck him on the head with the blade of the instrument. The man fell to the ground.

‘Fly!’ said Miss Aldclyffe to Manston. Manston vanished amidst the trees. Miss Aldclyffe went off in a contrary direction.

Anne Seaway was about to run away likewise, when she turned and looked at the fallen man. He lay on his face, motionless.

Many of these women who own to no moral code show considerable magnanimity when they see people in trouble. To act right simply because it is one’s duty is proper; but a good action which is the result of no law of reflection shines more than any. She went up to him and gently turned him over, upon which he began to show signs of life. By her assistance he was soon able to stand upright.

He looked about him with a bewildered air, endeavouring to collect his ideas. ‘Who are you?’ he said to the woman, mechanically.

It was bad policy now to attempt disguise. ‘I am the supposed Mrs. Manston,’ she said. ‘Who are you?’

‘I am the officer employed by Mr. Raunham to sift this mystery — which may be criminal.’ He stretched his limbs, pressed his head, and seemed gradually to awake to a sense of having been incautious in his utterance. ‘Never you mind who I am,’ he continued. ‘Well, it doesn’t matter now, either — it will no longer be a secret.’

He stooped for his hat and ran in the direction the steward had taken — coming back again after the lapse of a minute.

‘It’s only an aggravated assault, after all,’ he said hastily, ‘until we have found out for certain what’s buried here. It may be only a bag of building rubbish; but it may be more. Come and help me dig.’ He seized the spade with the awkwardness of a town man, and went into the pit, continuing a muttered discourse. ‘It’s no use my running after him single-handed,’ he said. ‘He’s ever so far off by this time. The best step is to see what is here.’

It was far easier for the detective to re-open the hole than it had been for Manston to form it. The leaves were raked away, the loam thrown out, and the sack dragged forth.

‘Hold this,’ he said to Anne, whose curiosity still kept her standing near. He turned on the light of a dark lantern he had brought, and gave it into her hand.

The string which bound the mouth of the sack was now cut. The officer laid the bag on its side, seized it by the bottom, and jerked forth the contents. A large package was disclosed, carefully wrapped up in impervious tarpaulin, also well tied. He was on the point of pulling open the folds at one end, when a light coloured thread of something, hanging on the outside, arrested his eye. He put his hand upon it; it felt stringy, and adhered to his fingers. 'Hold the light close,' he said.

She held it close. He raised his hand to the glass, and they both peered at an almost intangible filament he held between his finger and thumb. It was a long hair; the hair of a woman.

'God! I couldn't believe it — no, I couldn't believe it!' the detective whispered, horror-struck. 'And I have lost the man for the present through my unbelief. Let's get into a sheltered place... Now wait a minute whilst I prove it.'

He thrust his hand into his waistcoat pocket, and withdrew thence a minute packet of brown paper. Spreading it out he disclosed, coiled in the middle, another long hair. It was the hair the clerk's wife had found on Manston's pillow nine days before the Carriford fire. He held the two hairs to the light: they were both of a pale-brown hue. He laid them parallel and stretched out his arms: they were of the same length to a nicety. The detective turned to Anne.

'It is the body of his first wife,' he said quietly. 'He murdered her, as Mr. Springrove and the rector suspected — but how and when, God only knows.'

'And I!' exclaimed Anne Seaway, a probable and natural sequence of events and motives explanatory of the whole crime — events and motives shadowed forth by the letter, Manston's possession of it, his renunciation of Cytherea, and instalment of herself — flashing upon her mind with the rapidity of lightning.

'Ah — I see,' said the detective, standing unusually close to her: and a handcuff was on her wrist. 'You must come with me, madam. Knowing as much about a secret murder as God knows is a very suspicious thing: it doesn't make you a goddess — far from it.' He directed the bull's-eye into her face.

'Pooh — lead on,' she said scornfully, 'and don't lose your principal actor for the sake of torturing a poor subordinate like me.'

He loosened her hand, gave her his arm, and dragged her out of the grove — making her run beside him till they had reached the rectory. A light was burning here, and an auxiliary of the detective's awaiting him: a horse ready harnessed to a spring-cart was standing outside.

'You have come — I wish I had known that,' the detective said to his assistant, hurriedly and angrily. 'Well, we've blundered — he's gone — you should have been here, as I said! I was sold by that woman, Miss Aldclyffe — she watched me.' He hastily gave directions in an undertone to this man. The concluding words were, 'Go in to the rector — he's up. Detain Miss Aldclyffe. I, in the meantime, am driving to Casterbridge with this one, and for help. We shall be sure to have him when it gets light.'

He assisted Anne into the vehicle, and drove off with her. As they went, the clear, dry road showed before them, between the grassy quarters at each side, like a white riband, and made their progress easy. They came to a spot where the highway was overhung by dense firs for some distance on both sides. It was totally dark here.

There was a smash; and a rude shock. In the very midst of its length, at the point where the road began to drop down a hill, the detective drove against something with a jerk which nearly flung them both to the ground.

The man recovered himself, placed Anne on the seat, and reached out his hand. He found that the off-wheel of his gig was locked in that of another conveyance of some kind.

‘Hoy!’ said the officer.

Nobody answered.

‘Hoy, you man asleep there!’ he said again.

No reply.

‘Well, that’s odd — this comes of the folly of travelling without gig-lamps because you expect the dawn.’ He jumped to the ground and turned on his lantern.

There was the gig which had obstructed him, standing in the middle of the road; a jaded horse harnessed to it, but no human being in or near the vehicle.

‘Do you know whose gig this is?’ he said to the woman.

‘No,’ she said sullenly. But she did recognize it as the steward’s.

‘I’ll swear it’s Manston’s! Come, I can hear it by your tone. However, you needn’t say anything which may criminate you. What forethought the man must have had — how carefully he must have considered possible contingencies! Why, he must have got the horse and gig ready before he began shifting the body.’

He listened for a sound among the trees. None was to be heard but the occasional scamper of a rabbit over the withered leaves. He threw the light of his lantern through a gap in the hedge, but could see nothing beyond an impenetrable thicket. It was clear that Manston was not many yards off, but the question was how to find him. Nothing could be done by the detective just then, encumbered as he was by the horse and Anne. If he had entered the thicket on a search unaided, Manston might have stepped unobserved from behind a bush and murdered him with the greatest ease. Indeed, there were such strong reasons for the exploit in Manston’s circumstances at that moment that without showing cowardice, his pursuer felt it hazardous to remain any longer where he stood.

He hastily tied the head of Manston’s horse to the back of his own vehicle, that the steward might be deprived of the use of any means of escape other than his own legs, and drove on thus with his prisoner to the county-town. Arrived there, he lodged her in the police-station, and then took immediate steps for the capture of Manston.

XX. THE EVENTS OF THREE HOURS

1. MARCH THE TWENTY-THIRD. MIDDAY

Thirty-six hours had elapsed since Manston's escape.

It was market-day at the county-town. The farmers outside and inside the corn-exchange looked at their samples of wheat, and poured them critically as usual from one palm to another, but they thought and spoke of Manston. Grocers serving behind their counters, instead of using their constant phrase, 'The next article, please?' substituted, 'Have you heard if he's caught?' Dairywomen and drovers standing beside the sheep and cattle pens, spread their legs firmly, readjusted their hats, thrust their hands into the lowest depths of their pockets, regarded the animals with the utmost keenness of which the eye was capable, and said, 'Ay, ay, so's: they'll have him avore night.'

Later in the day Edward Springrove passed along the street hurriedly and anxiously. 'Well, have you heard any more?' he said to an acquaintance who accosted him.

'They tracked him in this way,' said the other young man. 'A vagrant first told them that Manston had passed a rick at daybreak, under which this man was lying. They followed the track he pointed out and ultimately came to a stile. On the other side was a heap of half-hardened mud, scraped from the road. On the surface of the heap, where it had been smoothed by the shovel, was distinctly imprinted the form of a man's hand, the buttons of his waistcoat, and his watch-chain, showing that he had stumbled in hurrying over the stile, and fallen there. The pattern of the chain proved the man to have been Manston. They followed on till they reached a ford crossed by stepping-stones — on the further bank were the same footmarks that had shown themselves beside the stile. The whole of this course had been in the direction of Budmouth. On they went, and the next clue was furnished them by a shepherd. He said that wherever a clear space three or four yards wide ran in a line through a flock of sheep lying about a ewe-lease, it was a proof that somebody had passed there not more than half-an-hour earlier. At twelve o'clock that day he had noticed such a feature in his flock. Nothing more could be heard of him, and they got into Budmouth. The steam-packet to the Channel Islands was to start at eleven last night, and they at once concluded that his hope was to get to France by way of Jersey and St. Malo — his only chance, all the railway-stations being watched.

'Well, they went to the boat: he was not on board then. They went again at half-past ten: he had not come. Two men now placed themselves under the lamp immediately beside the gangway. Another stayed by the office door, and one or two more up Mary Street — the straight cut to the quay. At a quarter to eleven the mail-bags were put on board. Whilst the attention of the idlers was directed to the mails, down Mary Street came a man as boldly as possible. The gait was Manston's, but not the clothes. He passed over to the shaded part of the street: heads were turned. I suppose this warned him, for he never emerged from the shadow. They watched and waited, but the steward did not reappear. The alarm was raised — they searched the town high and low — no Manston. All this morning they have been searching, but there's not a sign of him

anywhere. However, he has lost his last chance of getting across the Channel. It is reported that he has since changed clothes with a labourer.'

During this narration, Edward, lost in thought, had let his eyes follow a shabby man in a smock-frock, but wearing light boots — who was stalking down the street under a bundle of straw which overhung and concealed his head. It was a very ordinary circumstance for a man with a bundle of straw on his shoulders and overhanging his head, to go down the High Street. Edward saw him cross the bridge which divided the town from the country, place his shaggy encumbrance by the side of the road, and leave it there.

Springrove now parted from his acquaintance, and went also in the direction of the bridge, and some way beyond it. As far as he could see stretched the turnpike road, and, while he was looking, he noticed a man to leap from the hedge at a point two hundred, or two hundred and fifty yards ahead, cross the road, and go through a wicket on the other side. This figure seemed like that of the man who had been carrying the bundle of straw. He looked at the straw: it still stood alone.

The subjoined facts sprang, as it were, into juxtaposition in his brain: —

Manston had been seen wearing the clothes of a labouring man — a brown smock-frock. So had this man, who seemed other than a labourer, on second thoughts: and he had concealed his face by his bundle of straw with the greatest ease and naturalness.

The path the man had taken led, among other places, to Tolchurch, where Cytherea was living.

If Mrs. Manston was murdered, as some said, on the night of the fire, Cytherea was the steward's lawful wife. Manston at bay, and reckless of results, might rush to his wife and harm her.

It was a horrible supposition for a man who loved Cytherea to entertain; but Springrove could not resist its influence. He started off for Tolchurch.

2. ONE TO TWO O'CLOCK P.M.

On that self-same mid-day, whilst Edward was proceeding to Tolchurch by the footpath across the fields, Owen Graye had left the village and was riding along the turnpike road to the county-town, that he might ascertain the exact truth of the strange rumour which had reached him concerning Manston. Not to disquiet his sister, he had said nothing to her of the matter.

She sat by the window reading. From her position she could see up the lane for a distance of at least a hundred yards. Passers-by were so rare in this retired nook, that the eyes of those who dwelt by the wayside were invariably lifted to every one on the road, great and small, as to a novelty.

A man in a brown smock-frock turned the corner and came towards the house. It being market-day at Casterbridge, the village was nearly deserted, and more than this, the old farm-house in which Owen and his sister were staying, stood, as has been stated, apart from the body of cottages. The man did not look respectable; Cytherea arose and bolted the door.

Unfortunately he was near enough to see her cross the room. He advanced to the door, knocked, and, receiving no answer, came to the window; he next pressed his face against the glass, peering in.

Cytherea's experience at that moment was probably as trying as any ever fell to the lot of a gentlewoman to endure. She recognized in the peering face that of the man she had married.

But not a movement was made by her, not a sound escaped her. Her fear was great; but had she known the truth — that the man outside, feeling he had nothing on earth to lose by any act, was in the last stage of recklessness, terrified nature must have given way.

'Cytherea,' he said, 'let me come in: I am your husband.'

'No,' she replied, still not realising the magnitude of her peril. 'If you want to speak to us, wait till my brother comes.'

'O, he's not at home? Cytherea, I can't live without you! All my sin has been because I love you so! Will you fly with me? I have money enough for us both — only come with me.'

'Not now — not now.'

'I am your husband, I tell you, and I must come in.'

'You cannot,' she said faintly. His words began to terrify her.

'I will, I say!' he exclaimed. 'Will you let me in, I ask once more?'

'No — I will not,' said Cytherea.

'Then I will let myself in!' he answered resolutely. 'I will, if I die for it!'

The windows were glazed in lattice panes of leadwork, hung in casements. He broke one of the panes with a stone, thrust his hand through the hole, unfastened the latch which held the casement close, and began opening the window.

Instantly the shutters flew together with a slam, and were barred with desperate quickness by Cytherea on the inside.

'Damn you!' he exclaimed.

He ran round to the back of the house. His impatience was greater now: he thrust his fist through the pantry window at one blow, and opened it in the same way as the former one had been opened, before the terror-stricken girl was aware that he had gone round. In an instant he stood in the pantry, advanced to the front room where she was, flung back the shutters, and held out his arms to embrace her.

In extremely trying moments of bodily or mental pain, Cytherea either flushed hot or faded pale, according to the state of her constitution at the moment. Now she burned like fire from head to foot, and this preserved her consciousness.

Never before had the poor child's natural agility served her in such good stead as now. A heavy oblong table stood in the middle of the room. Round this table she flew, keeping it between herself and Manston, her large eyes wide open with terror, their dilated pupils constantly fixed upon Manston's, to read by his expression whether his next intention was to dart to the right or the left.

Even he, at that heated moment, could not endure the expression of unutterable agony which shone from that extraordinary gaze of hers. It had surely been given her by God as a means of defence. Manston continued his pursuit with a lowered eye.

The panting and maddened desperado — blind to everything but the capture of his wife — went with a rush under the table: she went over it like a bird. He went heavily over it: she flew under it, and was out at the other side.

‘One on her youth and pliant limbs relies,
One on his sinews and his giant size.’

But his superior strength was sure to tire her down in the long-run. She felt her weakness increasing with the quickness of her breath; she uttered a wild scream, which in its heartrending intensity seemed to echo for miles.

At the same juncture her hair became unfastened, and rolled down about her shoulders. The least accident at such critical periods is sufficient to confuse the overwrought intelligence. She lost sight of his intended direction for one instant, and he immediately outmanoeuvred her.

‘At last! my Cytherea!’ he cried, overturning the table, springing over it, seizing one of the long brown tresses, pulling her towards him, and clasping her round. She writhed downwards between his arms and breast, and fell fainting on the floor. For the first time his action was leisurely. He lifted her upon the sofa, exclaiming, ‘Rest there for a while, my frightened little bird!’

And then there was an end of his triumph. He felt himself clutched by the collar, and whizzed backwards with the force of a battering-ram against the fireplace. Springrove, wild, red, and breathless, had sprung in at the open window, and stood once more between man and wife.

Manston was on his legs again in an instant. A fiery glance on the one side, a glance of pitiless justice on the other, passed between them. It was again the meeting in the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite: ‘Hast thou found me, O mine enemy? And he answered, I have found thee: because thou hast sold thyself to work evil in the sight of the Lord.’

A desperate wrestle now began between the two men. Manston was the taller, but there was in Edward much hard tough muscle which the delicate flesh of the steward lacked. They flew together like the jaws of a gin. In a minute they were both on the floor, rolling over and over, locked in each other’s grasp as tightly as if they had been one organic being at war with itself — Edward trying to secure Manston’s arms with a small thong he had drawn from his pocket, Manston trying to reach his knife.

Two characteristic noises pervaded the apartment through this momentous space of time. One was the sharp panting of the two combatants, so similar in each as to be undistinguishable; the other was the stroke of their heels and toes, as they smote the floor at every contortion of body or limbs.

Cytherea had not lost consciousness for more than half-a-minute. She had then leapt up without recognizing that Edward was her deliverer, unfastened the door, and rushed out, screaming wildly, ‘Come! Help! O, help!’

Three men stood not twenty yards off, looking perplexed. They dashed forward at her words. 'Have you seen a shabby man with a smock-frock on lately?' they inquired. She pointed to the door, and ran on the same as before.

Manston, who had just loosened himself from Edward's grasp, seemed at this moment to renounce his intention of pushing the conflict to a desperate end. 'I give it all up for life — dear life!' he cried, with a hoarse laugh. 'A reckless man has a dozen lives — see how I'll baffle you all yet!'

He rushed out of the house, but no further. The boast was his last. In one half-minute more he was helpless in the hands of his pursuers.

Edward staggered to his feet, and paused to recover breath. His thoughts had never forsaken Cytherea, and his first act now was to hasten up the lane after her. She had not gone far. He found her leaning upon a bank by the roadside, where she had flung herself down in sheer exhaustion. He ran up and lifted her in his arms, and thus aided she was enabled to stand upright — clinging to him. What would Springrove have given to imprint a kiss upon her lips then!

They walked slowly towards the house. The distressing sensation of whose wife she was could not entirely quench the resuscitated pleasure he felt at her grateful recognition of him, and her confiding seizure of his arm for support. He conveyed her carefully into the house.

A quarter of an hour later, whilst she was sitting in a partially recovered, half-dozing state in an arm-chair, Edward beside her waiting anxiously till Graye should arrive, they saw a spring-cart pass the door. Old and dry mud-splashes from long-forgotten rains disfigured its wheels and sides; the varnish and paint had been scratched and dimmed; ornament had long been forgotten in a restless contemplation of use. Three men sat on the seat, the middle one being Manston. His hands were bound in front of him, his eyes were set directly forward, his countenance pallid, hard, and fixed.

Springrove had told Cytherea of Manston's crime in a few short words. He now said solemnly, 'He is to die.'

'And I cannot mourn for him,' she replied with a shudder, leaning back and covering her face with her hands.

In the silence that followed the two short remarks, Springrove watched the cart round the corner, and heard the rattle of its wheels gradually dying away as it rolled in the direction of the county-town.

XXI. THE EVENTS OF EIGHTEEN HOURS

1. MARCH THE TWENTY-NINTH. NOON

Exactly seven days after Edward Springrove had seen the man with the bundle of straw walking down the streets of Casterbridge, old Farmer Springrove was standing on the edge of the same pavement, talking to his friend, Farmer Baker.

There was a pause in their discourse. Mr. Springrove was looking down the street at some object which had attracted his attention. 'Ah, 'tis what we shall all come to!' he murmured.

The other looked in the same direction. 'True, neighbour Springrove; true.'

Two men, advancing one behind the other in the middle of the road, were what the farmers referred to. They were carpenters, and bore on their shoulders an empty coffin, covered by a thin black cloth.

'I always feel a satisfaction at being breasted by such a sight as that,' said Springrove, still regarding the men's sad burden. 'I call it a sort of medicine.'

'And it is medicine... I have not heard of any body being ill up this way lately? D'seem as if the person died suddenly.'

'May be so. Ah, Baker, we say sudden death, don't we? But there's no difference in their nature between sudden death and death of any other sort. There's no such thing as a random snapping off of what was laid down to last longer. We only suddenly light upon an end — thoughtfully formed as any other — which has been existing at that very same point from the beginning, though unseen by us to be so soon.'

'It is just a discovery to your own mind, and not an alteration in the Lord's.'

'That's it. Unexpected is not as to the thing, but as to our sight.'

'Now you'll hardly believe me, neighbour, but this little scene in front of us makes me feel less anxious about pushing on wi' that threshing and winnowing next week, that I was speaking about. Why should we not stand still, says I to myself, and fling a quiet eye upon the Whys and the Wherefores, before the end o' it all, and we go down into the mouldering-place, and are forgotten?'

'Tis a feeling that will come. But 'twont bear looking into. There's a back'ard current in the world, and we must do our utmost to advance in order just to bide where we be. But, Baker, they are turning in here with the coffin, look.'

The two carpenters had borne their load into a narrow way close at hand. The farmers, in common with others, turned and watched them along the way.

'Tis a man's coffin, and a tall man's, too,' continued Farmer Springrove. 'His was a fine frame, whoever he was.'

'A very plain box for the poor soul — just the rough elm, you see.' The corner of the cloth had blown aside.

'Yes, for a very poor man. Well, death's all the less insult to him. I have often thought how much smaller the richer class are made to look than the poor at last pinches like this. Perhaps the greatest of all the reconcilers of a thoughtful man to poverty — and I speak from experience — is the grand quiet it fills him with when the uncertainty of his life shows itself more than usual.'

As Springrove finished speaking, the bearers of the coffin went across a gravelled square facing the two men and approached a grim and heavy archway. They paused beneath it, rang a bell, and waited.

Over the archway was written in Egyptian capitals,
'COUNTY GAOL.'

The small rectangular wicket, which was constructed in one of the two iron-studded doors, was opened from the inside. The men severally stepped over the threshold, the coffin dragged its melancholy length through the aperture, and both entered the court, and were covered from sight.

‘Somebody in the gaol, then?’

‘Yes, one of the prisoners,’ said a boy, scudding by at the moment, who passed on whistling.

‘Do you know the name of the man who is dead?’ inquired Baker of a third bystander.

‘Yes, ‘tis all over town — surely you know, Mr. Springrove? Why, Manston, Miss Aldclyffe’s steward. He was found dead the first thing this morning. He had hung himself behind the door of his cell, in some way, by a handkerchief and some strips of his clothes. The turnkey says his features were scarcely changed, as he looked at ‘em with the early sun a-shining in at the grating upon him. He has left a full account of the murder, and all that led to it. So there’s an end of him.’

It was perfectly true: Manston was dead.

The previous day he had been allowed the use of writing-materials, and had occupied himself for nearly seven hours in preparing the following confession: —

‘LAST WORDS.

‘Having found man’s life to be a wretchedly conceived scheme, I renounce it, and, to cause no further trouble, I write down the facts connected with my past proceedings.

‘After thanking God, on first entering my house, on the night of the fire at Carriford, for my release from bondage to a woman I detested, I went, a second time, to the scene of the disaster, and, finding that nothing could be done by remaining there, shortly afterwards I returned home again in the company of Mr. Raunham.

‘He parted from me at the steps of my porch, and went back towards the rectory. Whilst I still stood at the door, musing on my strange deliverance, I saw a figure advance from beneath the shadow of the park trees. It was the figure of a woman.

‘When she came near, the twilight was sufficient to show me her attire: it was a cloak reaching to the bottom of her dress, and a thick veil covering her face. These features, together with her size and gait, aided also by a flash of perception as to the chain of events which had saved her life, told me that she was my wife Eunice.

‘I gnashed my teeth in a frenzy of despair; I had lost Cytherea; I had gained one whose beauty had departed, whose utterance was complaint, whose mind was shallow, and who drank brandy every day. The revulsion of feeling was terrible. Providence, whom I had just thanked, seemed a mocking tormentor laughing at me. I felt like a madman.

‘She came close — started at seeing me outside — then spoke to me. Her first words were reproof for what I had unintentionally done, and sounded as an earnest of what I was to be cursed with as long as we both lived. I answered angrily; this tone of mine changed her complaints to irritation. She taunted me with a secret she had

discovered, which concerned Miss Aldclyffe and myself. I was surprised to learn it — more surprised that she knew it, but concealed my feeling.

“How could you serve me so?” she said, her breath smelling of spirits even then. “You love another woman — yes, you do. See how you drive me about! I have been to the station, intending to leave you for ever, and yet I come to try you once more.”

‘An indescribable exasperation had sprung up in me as she talked — rage and regret were all in all. Scarcely knowing what I did, I furiously raised my hand and swung it round with my whole force to strike her. She turned quickly — and it was the poor creature’s end. By her movement my hand came edgewise exactly in the nape of the neck — as men strike a hare to kill it. The effect staggered me with amazement. The blow must have disturbed the vertebrae; she fell at my feet, made a few movements, and uttered one low sound.

‘I ran indoors for water and some wine, I came out and lanced her arm with my penknife. But she lay still, and I found that she was dead.

‘It was a long time before I could realise my horrible position. For several minutes I had no idea of attempting to escape the consequences of my deed. Then a light broke upon me. Had anybody seen her since she left the Three Tranters? Had they not, she was already believed by the parishioners to be dust and ashes. I should never be found out.

‘Upon this I acted.

‘The first question was how to dispose of the body. The impulse of the moment was to bury her at once in the pit between the engine-house and waterfall; but it struck me that I should not have time. It was now four o’clock, and the working-men would soon be stirring about the place. I would put off burying her till the next night. I carried her indoors.

‘In turning the outhouse into a workshop, earlier in the season, I found, when driving a nail into the wall for fixing a cupboard, that the wall sounded hollow. I examined it, and discovered behind the plaster an old oven which had long been disused, and was bricked up when the house was prepared for me.

‘To unfix this cupboard and pull out the bricks was the work of a few minutes. Then, bearing in mind that I should have to remove the body again the next night, I placed it in a sack, pushed it into the oven, packed in the bricks, and replaced the cupboard.

‘I then went to bed. In bed, I thought whether there were any very remote possibilities that might lead to the supposition that my wife was not consumed by the flames of the burning house. The thing which struck me most forcibly was this, that the searchers might think it odd that no remains whatever should be found.

‘The clinching and triumphant deed would be to take the body and place it among the ruins of the destroyed house. But I could not do this, on account of the men who were watching against an outbreak of the fire. One remedy remained.

‘I arose again, dressed myself, and went down to the outhouse. I must take down the cupboard again. I did take it down. I pulled out the bricks, pulled out the sack, pulled out the corpse, and took her keys from her pocket and the watch from her side.

‘I then replaced everything as before.

‘With these articles in my pocket I went out of the yard, and took my way through the withy copse to the churchyard, entering it from the back. Here I felt my way carefully along till I came to the nook where pieces of bones from newly-dug graves are sometimes piled behind the laurel-bushes. I had been earnestly hoping to find a skull among these old bones; but though I had frequently seen one or two in the rubbish here, there was not one now. I then groped in the other corner with the same result — nowhere could I find a skull. Three or four fragments of leg and back-bones were all I could collect, and with these I was forced to be content.

‘Taking them in my hand, I crossed the road, and got round behind the inn, where the couch heap was still smouldering. Keeping behind the hedge, I could see the heads of the three or four men who watched the spot.

‘Standing in this place I took the bones, and threw them one by one over the hedge and over the men’s heads into the smoking embers. When the bones had all been thrown, I threw the keys; last of all I threw the watch.

‘I then returned home as I had gone, and went to bed once more, just as the dawn began to break. I exulted — ”Cytherea is mine again!”

‘At breakfast-time I thought, “Suppose the cupboard should by some unlikely chance get moved to-day!”

‘I went to the mason’s yard hard by, while the men were at breakfast, and brought away a shovelful of mortar. I took it into the outhouse, again shifted the cupboard, and plastered over the mouth of the oven behind. Simply pushing the cupboard back into its place, I waited for the next night that I might bury the body, though upon the whole it was in a tolerably safe hiding-place.

‘When the night came, my nerves were in some way weaker than they had been on the previous night. I felt reluctant to touch the body. I went to the outhouse, but instead of opening the oven, I firmly drove in the shoulder-nails that held the cupboard to the wall. “I will bury her to-morrow night, however,” I thought.

‘But the next night I was still more reluctant to touch her. And my reluctance increased, and there the body remained. The oven was, after all, never likely to be opened in my time.

‘I married Cytherea Graye, and never did a bridegroom leave the church with a heart more full of love and happiness, and a brain more fixed on good intentions, than I did on that morning.

‘When Cytherea’s brother made his appearance at the hotel in Southampton, bearing his strange evidence of the porter’s disclosure, I was staggered beyond expression. I thought they had found the body. “Am I to be apprehended and to lose her even now?” I mourned. I saw my error, and instantly saw, too, that I must act externally like an honourable man. So at his request I yielded her up to him, and meditated on several schemes for enabling me to claim the woman I had a legal right to claim as my wife, without disclosing the reason why I knew myself to have it.

‘I went home to Knapwater the next day, and for nearly a week lived in a state of indecision. I could not hit upon a scheme for proving my wife dead without compromising myself.

‘Mr. Raunham hinted that I should take steps to discover her whereabouts by advertising. I had no energy for the farce. But one evening I chanced to enter the Rising Sun Inn. Two notorious poachers were sitting in the settle, which screened my entrance. They were half drunk — their conversation was carried on in the solemn and emphatic tone common to that stage of intoxication, and I myself was the subject of it.

‘The following was the substance of their disjointed remarks: On the night of the great fire at Carriford, one of them was sent to meet me, and break the news of the death of my wife to me. This he did; but because I would not pay him for his news, he left me in a mood of vindictiveness. When the fire was over, he joined his comrade. The favourable hour of the night suggested to them the possibility of some unlawful gain before daylight came. My fowlhouse stood in a tempting position, and still resenting his repulse during the evening, one of them proposed to operate upon my birds. I was believed to have gone to the rectory with Mr. Raunham. The other was disinclined to go, and the first went off alone.

‘It was now about three o’clock. He had advanced as far as the shrubbery, which grows near the north wall of the house, when he fancied he heard, above the rush of the waterfall, noises on the other side of the building. He described them in these words, “Ghostly mouths talking — then a fall — then a groan — then the rush of the water and creak of the engine as before.” Only one explanation occurred to him; the house was haunted. And, whether those of the living or the dead, voices of any kind were inimical to one who had come on such an errand. He stealthily crept home.

‘His unlawful purpose in being behind the house led him to conceal his adventure. No suspicion of the truth entered his mind till the railway-porter had startled everybody by his strange announcement. Then he asked himself, had the horrifying sounds of that night been really an enactment in the flesh between me and my wife?

‘The words of the other man were:

“‘Why don’t he try to find her if she’s alive?’”

“‘True,” said the first. “Well, I don’t forget what I heard, and if she don’t turn up alive my mind will be as sure as a Bible upon her murder, and the parson shall know it, though I do get six months on the treadmill for being where I was.”

“‘And if she should turn up alive?’”

“‘Then I shall know that I am wrong, and believing myself a fool as well as a rogue, hold my tongue.’”

‘I glided out of the house in a cold sweat. The only pressure in heaven or earth which could have forced me to renounce Cytherea was now put upon me — the dread of a death upon the gallows.

‘I sat all that night weaving strategy of various kinds. The only effectual remedy for my hazardous standing that I could see was a simple one. It was to substitute another

woman for my wife before the suspicions of that one easily-hoodwinked man extended further.

‘The only difficulty was to find a practicable substitute.

‘The one woman at all available for the purpose was a friendless, innocent creature, named Anne Seaway, whom I had known in my youth, and who had for some time been the housekeeper of a lady in London. On account of this lady’s sudden death, Anne stood in rather a precarious position, as regarded her future subsistence. She was not the best kind of woman for the scheme; but there was no alternative. One quality of hers was valuable; she was not a talker. I went to London the very next day, called at the Hoxton lodging of my wife (the only place at which she had been known as Mrs. Manston), and found that no great difficulties stood in the way of a personation. And thus favouring circumstances determined my course. I visited Anne Seaway, made love to her, and propounded my plan.

‘We lived quietly enough until the Sunday before my apprehension. Anne came home from church that morning, and told me of the suspicious way in which a young man had looked at her there. Nothing could be done beyond waiting the issue of events. Then the letter came from Raunham. For the first time in my life I was half indifferent as to what fate awaited me. During the succeeding day I thought once or twice of running away, but could not quite make up my mind. At any rate it would be best to bury the body of my wife, I thought, for the oven might be opened at any time. I went to Casterbridge and made some arrangements. In the evening Miss Aldclyffe (who is united to me by a common secret which I have no right or wish to disclose) came to my house, and alarmed me still more. She said that she could tell by Mr. Raunham’s manner that evening, that he kept back from her a suspicion of more importance even than the one he spoke of, and that strangers were in his house even then.

‘I guessed what this further suspicion was, and resolved to enlighten her to a certain extent, and so secure her assistance. I said that I killed my wife by an accident on the night of the fire, dwelling upon the advantage to her of the death of the only woman who knew her secret.

‘Her terror, and fears for my fate, led her to watch the rectory that evening. She saw the detective leave it, and followed him to my residence. This she told me hurriedly when I perceived her after digging my wife’s grave in the plantation. She did not suspect what the sack contained.

‘I am now about to enter on my normal condition. For people are almost always in their graves. When we survey the long race of men, it is strange and still more strange to find that they are mainly dead men, who have scarcely ever been otherwise.

‘AENEAS MANSTON.’

The steward’s confession, aided by circumstantial evidence of various kinds, was the means of freeing both Anne Seaway and Miss Aldclyffe from all suspicion of complicity with the murderer.

2. SIX O’CLOCK P.M.

It was evening — just at sunset — on the day of Manston’s death.

In the cottage at Tolchurch was gathered a group consisting of Cytherea, her brother, Edward Springrove, and his father. They sat by the window conversing of the strange events which had just taken place. In Cytherea's eye there beamed a hopeful ray, though her face was as white as a lily.

Whilst they talked, looking out at the yellow evening light that coated the hedges, trees, and church tower, a brougham rolled round the corner of the lane, and came in full view. It reflected the rays of the sun in a flash from its polished panels as it turned the angle, the spokes of the wheels bristling in the same light like bayonets. The vehicle came nearer, and arrived opposite Owen's door, when the driver pulled the rein and gave a shout, and the panting and sweating horses stopped.

'Miss Aldclyffe's carriage!' they all exclaimed.

Owen went out. 'Is Miss Graye at home?' said the man. 'A note for her, and I am to wait for an answer.'

Cytherea read in the handwriting of the Rector of Carriford: —

'DEAR MISS GRAYE, — Miss Aldclyffe is ill, though not dangerously. She continually repeats your name, and now wishes very much to see you. If you possibly can, come in the carriage. — Very sincerely yours, JOHN RAUNHAM.'

'How comes she ill?' Owen inquired of the coachman.

'She caught a violent cold by standing out of doors in the damp, on the night the steward ran away. Ever since, till this morning, she complained of fulness and heat in the chest. This morning the maid ran in and told her suddenly that Manston had killed himself in gaol — she shrieked — broke a blood-vessel — and fell upon the floor. Severe internal haemorrhage continued for some time and then stopped. They say she is sure to get over it; but she herself says no. She has suffered from it before.'

Cytherea was ready in a few moments, and entered the carriage.

3. SEVEN O'CLOCK P.M.

Soft as was Cytherea's motion along the corridors of Knapwater House, the preternaturally keen intelligence of the suffering woman caught the maiden's well-known footfall. She entered the sick-chamber with suspended breath.

In the room everything was so still, and sensation was as it were so rarefied by solicitude, that thinking seemed acting, and the lady's weak act of trying to live a silent wrestling with all the powers of the universe. Nobody was present but Mr. Raunham, the nurse having left the room on Cytherea's entry, and the physician and surgeon being engaged in a whispered conversation in a side-chamber. Their patient had been pronounced out of danger.

Cytherea went to the bedside, and was instantly recognized. O, what a change — Miss Aldclyffe dependent upon pillows! And yet not a forbidding change. With weakness had come softness of aspect: the haughtiness was extracted from the frail thin countenance, and a sweeter mild placidity had taken its place.

Miss Aldclyffe signified to Mr. Raunham that she would like to be alone with Cytherea.

'Cytherea?' she faintly whispered the instant the door was closed.

Cytherea clasped the lady's weak hand, and sank beside her.

Miss Aldclyffe whispered again. 'They say I am certain to live; but I know that I am certainly going to die.'

'They know, I think, and hope.'

'I know best, but we'll leave that. Cytherea — O Cytherea, can you forgive me!'

Her companion pressed her hand.

'But you don't know yet — you don't know yet,' the invalid murmured. 'It is forgiveness for that misrepresentation to Edward Springrove that I implore, and for putting such force upon him — that which caused all the train of your innumerable ills!'

'I know all — all. And I do forgive you. Not in a hasty impulse that is revoked when coolness comes, but deliberately and sincerely: as I myself hope to be forgiven, I accord you my forgiveness now.'

Tears streamed from Miss Aldclyffe's eyes, and mingled with those of her young companion, who could not restrain hers for sympathy. Expressions of strong attachment, interrupted by emotion, burst again and again from the broken-spirited woman.

'But you don't know my motive. O, if you only knew it, how you would pity me then!'

Cytherea did not break the pause which ensued, and the elder woman appeared now to nerve herself by a superhuman effort. She spoke on in a voice weak as a summer breeze, and full of intermission, and yet there pervaded it a steadiness of intention that seemed to demand firm tones to bear it out worthily.

'Cytherea,' she said, 'listen to me before I die.'

'A long time ago — more than thirty years ago — a young girl of seventeen was cruelly betrayed by her cousin, a wild officer of six-and-twenty. He went to India, and died.'

'One night when that miserable girl had just arrived home with her parents from Germany, where her baby had been born, she took all the money she possessed, pinned it on her infant's bosom, together with a letter, stating, among other things, what she wished the child's Christian name to be; wrapped up the little thing, and walked with it to Clapham. Here, in a retired street, she selected a house. She placed the child on the doorstep and knocked at the door, then ran away and watched. They took it up and carried it indoors.'

'Now that her poor baby was gone, the girl blamed herself bitterly for cruelty towards it, and wished she had adopted her parents' counsel to secretly hire a nurse. She longed to see it. She didn't know what to do. She wrote in an assumed name to the woman who had taken it in, and asked her to meet the writer with the infant at certain places she named. These were hotels or coffee-houses in Chelsea, Pimlico, or Hammersmith. The woman, being well paid, always came, and asked no questions. At one meeting — at an inn in Hammersmith — she made her appearance without the child, and told the girl it was so ill that it would not live through the night. The news, and fatigue, brought on a fainting-fit...'

Miss Aldclyffe's sobs choked her utterance, and she became painfully agitated. Cytherea, pale and amazed at what she heard, wept for her, bent over her, and begged her not to go on speaking.

'Yes — I must,' she cried, between her sobs. 'I will — I must go on! And I must tell yet more plainly!... you must hear it before I am gone, Cytherea.' The sympathizing and astonished girl sat down again.

'The name of the woman who had taken the child was Manston. She was the widow of a schoolmaster. She said she had adopted the child of a relation.

'Only one man ever found out who the mother was. He was the keeper of the inn in which she fainted, and his silence she has purchased ever since.

'A twelvemonth passed — fifteen months — and the saddened girl met a man at her father's house named Graye — your father, Cytherea, then unmarried. Ah, such a man! Inexperience now perceived what it was to be loved in spirit and in truth! But it was too late. Had he known her secret he would have cast her out. She withdrew from him by an effort, and pined.

'Years and years afterwards, when she became mistress of a fortune and estates by her father's death, she formed the weak scheme of having near her the son whom, in her father's life-time, she had been forbidden to recognize. Cytherea, you know who that weak woman is.

'By such toilsome labour as this I got him here as my steward. And I wanted to see him your husband, Cytherea! — the husband of my true lover's child. It was a sweet dream to me... Pity me — O, pity me! To die unloved is more than I can bear! I loved your father, and I love him now.'

That was the burden of Cytherea Aldclyffe.

'I suppose you must leave me again — you always leave me,' she said, after holding the young woman's hand a long while in silence.

'No — indeed I'll stay always. Do you like me to stay?'

Miss Aldclyffe in the jaws of death was Miss Aldclyffe still, though the old fire had degenerated to mere phosphorescence now. 'But you are your brother's housekeeper?'

'Yes.'

'Well, of course you cannot stay with me on a sudden like this... Go home, or he will be at a loss for things. And to-morrow morning come again, won't you, dearest, come again — we'll fetch you. But you mustn't stay now, and put Owen out. O no — it would be absurd.' The absorbing concern about trifles of daily routine, which is so often seen in very sick people, was present here.

Cytherea promised to go home, and come the next morning to stay continuously.

'Stay till I die then, will you not? Yes, till I die — I shan't die till to-morrow.'

'We hope for your recovery — all of us.'

'I know best. Come at six o'clock, darling.'

'As soon as ever I can,' returned Cytherea tenderly.

'But six is too early — you will have to think of your brother's breakfast. Leave Tolchurch at eight, will you?'

Cytherea consented to this. Miss Aldclyffe would never have known had her companion stayed in the house all night; but the honesty of Cytherea's nature rebelled against even the friendly deceit which such a proceeding would have involved.

An arrangement was come to whereby she was to be taken home in the pony-carriage instead of the brougham that fetched her; the carriage to put up at Tolchurch farm for the night, and on that account to be in readiness to bring her back earlier.

4. MARCH THE THIRTIETH. DAYBREAK

The third and last instance of Cytherea's subjection to those periodic terrors of the night which had emphasized her connection with the Aldclyffe name and blood occurred at the present date.

It was about four o'clock in the morning when Cytherea, though most probably dreaming, seemed to awake — and instantly was transfixed by a sort of spell, that had in it more of awe than of affright. At the foot of her bed, looking her in the face with an expression of entreaty beyond the power of words to portray, was the form of Miss Aldclyffe — wan and distinct. No motion was perceptible in her; but longing — earnest longing — was written in every feature.

Cytherea believed she exercised her waking judgment as usual in thinking, without a shadow of doubt, that Miss Aldclyffe stood before her in flesh and blood. Reason was not sufficiently alert to lead Cytherea to ask herself how such a thing could have occurred.

'I would have remained with you — why would you not allow me to stay!' Cytherea exclaimed. The spell was broken: she became broadly awake; and the figure vanished.

It was in the grey time of dawn. She trembled in a sweat of disquiet, and not being able to endure the thought of her brother being asleep, she went and tapped at his door.

'Owen!'

He was not a heavy sleeper, and it was verging upon his time to rise.

'What do you want, Cytherea?'

'I ought not to have left Knapwater last night. I wish I had not. I really think I will start at once. She wants me, I know.'

'What time is it?'

'A few minutes past four.'

'You had better not. Keep to the time agreed upon. Consider, we should have such a trouble in rousing the driver, and other things.'

Upon the whole it seemed wiser not to act on a mere fancy. She went to bed again.

An hour later, when Owen was thinking of getting up, a knocking came to the front door. The next minute something touched the glass of Owen's window. He waited — the noise was repeated. A little gravel had been thrown against it to arouse him.

He crossed the room, pulled up the blind, and looked out. A solemn white face was gazing upwards from the road, expectantly straining to catch the first glimpse of a person within the panes. It was the face of a Knapwater man sitting on horseback.

Owen saw his errand. There is an unmistakable look in the face of every man who brings tidings of death. Graye opened the window.

‘Miss Aldclyffe...’ said the messenger, and paused.

‘Ah — dead?’

‘Yes — she is dead.’

‘When did she die?’

‘At ten minutes past four, after another effusion. She knew best, you see, sir. I started directly, by the rector’s orders.’

SEQUEL

Fifteen months have passed, and we are brought on to Midsummer Night, 1867.

The picture presented is the interior of the old belfry of Carriford Church, at ten o’clock in the evening.

Six Carriford men and one stranger are gathered there, beneath the light of a flaring candle stuck on a piece of wood against the wall. The six Carriford men are the well-known ringers of the fine-toned old bells in the key of F, which have been music to the ears of Carriford parish and the outlying districts for the last four hundred years. The stranger is an assistant, who has appeared from nobody knows where.

The six natives — in their shirt-sleeves, and without hats — pull and catch frantically at the dancing bellropes, the locks of their hair waving in the breeze created by their quick motions; the stranger, who has the treble bell, does likewise, but in his right mind and coat. Their ever-changing shadows mingle on the wall in an endless variety of kaleidoscopic forms, and the eyes of all the seven are religiously fixed on a diagram like a large addition sum, which is chalked on the floor.

Vividly contrasting with the yellow light of the candle upon the four unplastered walls of the tower, and upon the faces and clothes of the men, is the scene discernible through the screen beneath the tower archway. At the extremity of the long mysterious avenue of the nave and chancel can be seen shafts of moonlight streaming in at the east window of the church — blue, phosphoric, and ghostly.

A thorough renovation of the bell-ringing machinery and accessories had taken place in anticipation of an interesting event. New ropes had been provided; every bell had been carefully shifted from its carriage, and the pivots lubricated. Bright red ‘sallies’ of woollen texture — soft to the hands and easily caught — glowed on the ropes in place of the old ragged knots, all of which newness in small details only rendered more evident the irrepressible aspect of age in the mass surrounding them.

The triple-bob-major was ended, and the ringers wiped their faces and rolled down their shirt-sleeves, previously to tucking away the ropes and leaving the place for the night.

‘Piph — h — h — h! A good forty minutes,’ said a man with a streaming face, and blowing out his breath — one of the pair who had taken the tenor bell.

‘Our friend here pulled proper well — that ‘a did — seeing he’s but a stranger,’ said Clerk Crickett, who had just resigned the second rope, and addressing the man in the black coat.

‘‘A did,’ said the rest.

‘I enjoyed it much,’ said the man modestly.

‘What we should ha’ done without you words can’t tell. The man that d’belong by rights to that there bell is ill o’ two gallons o’ wold cider.’

‘And now so’s,’ remarked the fifth ringer, as pertaining to the last allusion, ‘we’ll finish this drop o’ metheglin and cider, and every man home — along straight as a line.’

‘Wi’ all my heart,’ Clerk Crickett replied. ‘And the Lord send if I ha’n’t done my duty by Master Teddy Springrove — that I have so.’

‘And the rest o’ us,’ they said, as the cup was handed round.

‘Ay, ay — in ringen — but I was spaken in a spiritual sense o’ this mornen’s business o’ mine up by the chancel rails there. ‘Twas very convenient to lug her here and marry her instead o’ doen it at that twopenny-halfpenny town o’ Budm’t’h. Very convenient.’

‘Very. There was a little fee for Master Crickett.’

‘Ah — well. Money’s money — very much so — very — I always have said it. But ‘twas a pretty sight for the nation. He coloured up like any maid, that ‘a did.’

‘Well enough ‘a mid colour up. ‘Tis no small matter for a man to play wi’ fire.’

‘Whatever it may be to a woman,’ said the clerk absently.

‘Thou’rt thinken o’ thy wife, clerk,’ said Gad Weedy. ‘She’ll play wi’it again when thou’st got mildewed.’

‘Well — let her, God bless her; for I’m but a poor third man, I. The Lord have mercy upon the fourth!... Ay, Teddy’s got his own at last. What little white ears that maid hev, to be sure! choose your wife as you choose your pig — a small ear and a small tale — that was always my joke when I was a merry feller, ah — years ago now! But Teddy’s got her. Poor chap, he was gotten as thin as a hermit wi’ grief — so was she.’

‘Maybe she’ll pick up now.’

‘True — ’tis nater’s law, which no man shall gainsay. Ah, well do I bear in mind what I said to Pa’son Raunham, about thy mother’s family o’ seven, Gad, the very first week of his comen here, when I was just in my prime. “And how many daughters has that poor Weedy got, clerk?” he says. “Six, sir,” says I, “and every one of ‘em has a brother!” “Poor woman,” says he, “a dozen children! — give her this half-sovereign from me, clerk.” ‘A laughed a good five minutes afterwards, when he found out my merry nater — ‘a did. But there, ‘tis over wi’ me now. Enteren the Church is the ruin of a man’s wit for wit’s nothen without a faint shadder o’ sin.’

‘If so be Teddy and the lady had been kept apart for life, they’d both ha’ died,’ said Gad emphatically.

‘But now instead o’ death there’ll be increase o’ life,’ answered the clerk.

‘It all went proper well,’ said the fifth bell-ringer. ‘They didn’t flee off to Babylonish places — not they.’ He struck up an attitude — ‘Here’s Master Springrove standen so: here’s the married woman standen likewise; here they d’walk across to Knapwater House; and there they d’bide in the chimley corner, hard and fast.’

‘Yes, ‘twas a pretty wedden, and well attended,’ added the clerk. ‘Here was my lady herself — red as scarlet: here was Master Springrove, looken as if he half wished he’d never a-come — ah, poor souls! — the men always do! The women do stand it best — the maid was in her glory. Though she was so shy the glory shone plain through that shy skin. Ah, it did so’s.’

‘Ay,’ said Gad, ‘and there was Tim Tankins and his five journeymen carpenters, standen on tiptoe and peepen in at the chancel winders. There was Dairyman Dodman waiten in his new spring-cart to see ‘em come out — whip in hand — that ‘a was. Then up comes two master tailors. Then there was Christopher Runt wi’ his pickaxe and shovel. There was wimmen-folk and there was men-folk traypsen up and down church’ard till they wore a path wi’ traypsen so — letten the squallen children slip down through their arms and nearly skinnen o’ em. And these were all over and above the gentry and Sunday-clothes folk inside. Well, I seed Mr. Graye at last dressed up quite the dand. “Well, Mr. Graye,” says I from the top o’ church’ard wall, “how’s yerself?” Mr. Graye never spoke — he’d prided away his hearen. Seize the man, I didn’ want en to spak. Teddy hears it, and turns round: “All right, Gad!” says he, and laughed like a boy. There’s more in Teddy.’

‘Well,’ said Clerk Crickett, turning to the man in black, ‘now you’ve been among us so long, and d’know us so well, won’t ye tell us what ye’ve come here for, and what your trade is?’

‘I am no trade,’ said the thin man, smiling, ‘and I came to see the wickedness of the land.’

‘I said thou wast one o’ the devil’s brood wi’ thy black clothes,’ replied a sturdy ringer, who had not spoken before.

‘No, the truth is,’ said the thin man, retracting at this horrible translation, ‘I came for a walk because it is a fine evening.’

‘Now let’s be off, neighbours,’ the clerk interrupted.

The candle was inverted in the socket, and the whole party stepped out into the churchyard. The moon was shining within a day or two of full, and just overlooked the three or four vast yews that stood on the south-east side of the church, and rose in unvaried and flat darkness against the illuminated atmosphere behind them.

‘Good-night,’ the clerk said to his comrades, when the door was locked. ‘My nearest way is through the park.’

‘I suppose mine is too?’ said the stranger. ‘I am going to the railway-station.’

‘Of course — come on.’

The two men went over a stile to the west, the remainder of the party going into the road on the opposite side.

‘And so the romance has ended well,’ the clerk’s companion remarked, as they brushed along through the grass. ‘But what is the truth of the story about the property?’

‘Now look here, neighbour,’ said Clerk Crickett, ‘if so be you’ll tell me what your line o’ life is, and your purpose in comen here to-day, I’ll tell you the truth about the wedden particulars.’

‘Very well — I will when you have done,’ said the other man.

‘‘Tis a bargain; and this is the right o’ the story. When Miss Aldclyffe’s will was opened, it was found to have been drawn up on the very day that Manston (her love-child) married Miss Cytherea Graye. And this is what that deep woman did. Deep? she was as deep as the North Star. She bequeathed all her property, real and personal, to “THE WIFE OF AENEAS MANSTON” (with one exception): failen her life to her husband: failen his life to the heirs of his head — body I would say: failen them to her absolutely and her heirs for ever: failen these to Pa’son Raunham, and so on to the end o’ the human race. Now do you see the depth of her scheme? Why, although upon the surface it appeared her whole property was for Miss Cytherea, by the word “wife” being used, and not Cytherea’s name, whoever was the wife o’ Manston would come in for’t. Wasn’t that rale depth? It was done, of course, that her son AENEAS, under any circumstances, should be master o’ the property, without folk knowen it was her son or suspecting anything, as they would if it had been left to en straightway.’

‘A clever arrangement! And what was the exception?’

‘The payment of a legacy to her relative, Pa’son Raunham.’

‘And Miss Cytherea was now Manston’s widow and only relative, and inherited all absolutely.’

‘True, she did. “Well,” says she, “I shan’t have it” (she didn’t like the notion o’ getten anything through Manston, naturally enough, pretty dear). She waived her right in favour o’ Mr. Raunham. Now, if there’s a man in the world that d’care nothen about land — I don’t say there is, but if there is — ’tis our pa’son. He’s like a snail. He’s a-growed so to the shape o’ that there rectory that ‘a wouldn’ think o’ leaven it even in name. “‘Tis yours, Miss Graye,” says he. “No, ‘tis yours,” says she. “‘Tis’n’ mine,” says he. The Crown had cast his eyes upon the case, thinken o’ forfeiture by felony — but ‘twas no such thing, and ‘a gied it up, too. Did you ever hear such a tale? — three people, a man and a woman, and a Crown — neither o’ em in a madhouse — flingen an estate backwards and forwards like an apple or nut? Well, it ended in this way. Mr. Raunham took it: young Springrove was had as agent and steward, and put to live in Knapwater House, close here at hand — just as if ‘twas his own. He does just what he’d like — Mr. Raunham never interferen — and hither to-day he’s brought his new wife, Cytherea. And a settlement ha’ been drawn up this very day, whereby their children, heirs, and cetrer, be to inherit after Mr. Raunham’s death. Good fortune came at last. Her brother, too, is doen well. He came in first man in some architectural competition, and is about to move to London. Here’s the house, look. Stap out from these bushes, and you’ll get a clear sight o’t.’

They emerged from the shrubbery, breaking off towards the lake, and down the south slope. When they arrived exactly opposite the centre of the mansion, they halted.

It was a magnificent picture of the English country-house. The whole of the severe regular front, with its columns and cornices, was built of a white smoothly-faced free-stone, which appeared in the rays of the moon as pure as Pentelic marble. The sole objects in the scene rivalling the fairness of the facade were a dozen swans floating upon the lake.

At this moment the central door at the top of the steps was opened, and two figures advanced into the light. Two contrasting figures were they. A young lithe woman in an airy fairy dress — Cytherea Springrove: a young man in black stereotype raiment — Edward, her husband.

They stood at the top of the steps together, looking at the moon, the water, and the general loveliness of the prospect.

‘That’s the married man and wife — there, I’ve illustrated my story by rare liven specimens,’ the clerk whispered.

‘To be sure, how close together they do stand! You couldn’ slip a penny-piece between ‘em — that you couldn’! Beautiful to see it, isn’t it — beautiful!... But this is a private path, and we won’t let ‘em see us, as all the ringers be goen there to a supper and dance to-morrow night.’

The speaker and his companion softly moved on, passed through the wicket, and into the coach-road. Arrived at the clerk’s house at the further boundary of the park, they paused to part.

‘Now for your half o’ the bargain,’ said Clerk Crickett. ‘What’s your line o’ life, and what d’ye come here for?’

‘I’m the reporter to the Casterbridge Chronicle, and I come to pick up the news. Good-night.’

Meanwhile Edward and Cytherea, after lingering on the steps for several minutes, slowly descended the slope to the lake. The skiff was lying alongside.

‘O, Edward,’ said Cytherea, ‘you must do something that has just come into my head!’

‘Well, dearest — I know.’

‘Yes — give me one half-minute’s row on the lake here now, just as you did on Budmouth Bay three years ago.’

He handed her into the boat, and almost noiselessly pulled off from shore. When they were half-way between the two margins of the lake, he paused and looked at her.

‘Ah, darling, I remember exactly how I kissed you that first time,’ said Springrove. ‘You were there as you are now. I unshipped the sculls in this way. Then I turned round and sat beside you — in this way. Then I put my hand on the other side of your little neck — ’

‘I think it was just on my cheek, in this way.’

‘Ah, so it was. Then you moved that soft red mouth round to mine — ’

‘But, dearest — you pressed it round if you remember; and of course I couldn’t then help letting it come to your mouth without being unkind to you, and I wouldn’t be that.’

‘And then I put my cheek against that cheek, and turned my two lips round upon those two lips, and kissed them — so.’

UNDER THE GREENWOOD TREE

The Mellstock Quire: A Rural Painting of the Dutch School

Under the Greenwood Tree is Hardy's second novel, published anonymously in 1872. It was the last to be printed without his name and the first of his great series of Wessex novels. Although Hardy originally thought of simply calling it *The Mellstock Quire*, he settled on a title taken from a song in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*.

Hardy, aged 47

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PREFACE

This story of the Mellstock Quire and its old established west-gallery musicians, with some supplementary descriptions of similar officials in *Two on a Tower*, *A Few Crusted Characters*, and other places, is intended to be a fairly true picture, at first hand, of the personages, ways, and customs which were common among such orchestral bodies in the villages of fifty or sixty years ago.

One is inclined to regret the displacement of these ecclesiastical bandsmen by an isolated organist (often at first a barrel-organist) or harmonium player; and despite certain advantages in point of control and accomplishment which were, no doubt, secured by installing the single artist, the change has tended to stultify the professed aims of the clergy, its direct result being to curtail and extinguish the interest of parishioners in church doings. Under the old plan, from half a dozen to ten full-grown players, in addition to the numerous more or less grown-up singers, were officially occupied with the Sunday routine, and concerned in trying their best to make it an artistic outcome of the combined musical taste of the congregation. With a musical executive limited, as it mostly is limited now, to the parson's wife or daughter and the school-children, or to the school-teacher and the children, an important union of interests has disappeared.

The zest of these bygone instrumentalists must have been keen and staying to take them, as it did, on foot every Sunday after a toilsome week, through all weathers, to the church, which often lay at a distance from their homes. They usually received so little in payment for their performances that their efforts were really a labour of love. In the parish I had in my mind when writing the present tale, the gratuities received yearly by the musicians at Christmas were somewhat as follows: From the manor-house ten shillings and a supper; from the vicar ten shillings; from the farmers five shillings each; from each cottage-household one shilling; amounting altogether to not more than ten shillings a head annually — just enough, as an old executant told me, to pay for their fiddle-strings, repairs, rosin, and music-paper (which they mostly ruled themselves). Their music in those days was all in their own manuscript, copied in the evenings after work, and their music-books were home-bound.

It was customary to inscribe a few jigs, reels, horn-pipes, and ballads in the same book, by beginning it at the other end, the insertions being continued from front and back till sacred and secular met together in the middle, often with bizarre effect, the words of some of the songs exhibiting that ancient and broad humour which our grandfathers, and possibly grandmothers, took delight in, and is in these days unquotable.

The aforesaid fiddle-strings, rosin, and music-paper were supplied by a pedlar, who travelled exclusively in such wares from parish to parish, coming to each village about every six months. Tales are told of the consternation once caused among the church fiddlers when, on the occasion of their producing a new Christmas anthem, he did not come to time, owing to being snowed up on the downs, and the straits they were in through having to make shift with whipcord and twine for strings. He was generally a

musician himself, and sometimes a composer in a small way, bringing his own new tunes, and tempting each choir to adopt them for a consideration. Some of these compositions which now lie before me, with their repetitions of lines, half-lines, and half-words, their fugues and their intermediate symphonies, are good singing still, though they would hardly be admitted into such hymn-books as are popular in the churches of fashionable society at the present time.

August 1896.

Under the Greenwood Tree was first brought out in the summer of 1872 in two volumes. The name of the story was originally intended to be, more appropriately, The Mellstock Quire, and this has been appended as a sub-title since the early editions, it having been thought unadvisable to displace for it the title by which the book first became known.

In rereading the narrative after a long interval there occurs the inevitable reflection that the realities out of which it was spun were material for another kind of study of this little group of church musicians than is found in the chapters here penned so lightly, even so farcically and flippantly at times. But circumstances would have rendered any aim at a deeper, more essential, more transcendent handling unadvisable at the date of writing; and the exhibition of the Mellstock Quire in the following pages must remain the only extant one, except for the few glimpses of that perished band which I have given in verse elsewhere.

T. H.

April 1912.

PART THE FIRST — WINTER

CHAPTER I:

MELLSTOCK-LANE

To dwellers in a wood almost every species of tree has its voice as well as its feature. At the passing of the breeze the fir-trees sob and moan no less distinctly than they rock; the holly whistles as it battles with itself; the ash hisses amid its quiverings; the beech rustles while its flat boughs rise and fall. And winter, which modifies the note of such trees as shed their leaves, does not destroy its individuality.

On a cold and starry Christmas-eve within living memory a man was passing up a lane towards Mellstock Cross in the darkness of a plantation that whispered thus distinctively to his intelligence. All the evidences of his nature were those afforded by the spirit of his footsteps, which succeeded each other lightly and quickly, and by the liveliness of his voice as he sang in a rural cadence:

”With the rose and the lily
And the daffodowndilly,
The lads and the lasses a-sheep-shearing go.”

The lonely lane he was following connected one of the hamlets of Mellstock parish with Upper Mellstock and Lewgate, and to his eyes, casually glancing upward, the silver and black-stemmed birches with their characteristic tufts, the pale grey boughs of beech, the dark-creviced elm, all appeared now as black and flat outlines upon the sky, wherein the white stars twinkled so vehemently that their flickering seemed like the flapping of wings. Within the woody pass, at a level anything lower than the horizon, all was dark as the grave. The copse-wood forming the sides of the bower interlaced its branches so densely, even at this season of the year, that the draught from the north-east flew along the channel with scarcely an interruption from lateral breezes.

After passing the plantation and reaching Mellstock Cross the white surface of the lane revealed itself between the dark hedgerows like a ribbon jagged at the edges; the irregularity being caused by temporary accumulations of leaves extending from the ditch on either side.

The song (many times interrupted by fitting thoughts which took the place of several bars, and resumed at a point it would have reached had its continuity been unbroken) now received a more palpable check, in the shape of "Ho-i-i-i-i!" from the crossing lane to Lower Mellstock, on the right of the singer who had just emerged from the trees.

"Ho-i-i-i-i!" he answered, stopping and looking round, though with no idea of seeing anything more than imagination pictured.

"Is that thee, young Dick Dewy?" came from the darkness.

"Ay, sure, Michael Mail."

"Then why not stop for fellow-craters — going to thy own father's house too, as we be, and knowen us so well?"

Dick Dewy faced about and continued his tune in an under-whistle, implying that the business of his mouth could not be checked at a moment's notice by the placid emotion of friendship.

Having come more into the open he could now be seen rising against the sky, his profile appearing on the light background like the portrait of a gentleman in black cardboard. It assumed the form of a low-crowned hat, an ordinary-shaped nose, an ordinary chin, an ordinary neck, and ordinary shoulders. What he consisted of further down was invisible from lack of sky low enough to picture him on.

Shuffling, halting, irregular footsteps of various kinds were now heard coming up the hill, and presently there emerged from the shade severally five men of different ages and gaits, all of them working villagers of the parish of Mellstock. They, too, had lost their rotundity with the daylight, and advanced against the sky in flat outlines, which suggested some processional design on Greek or Etruscan pottery. They represented the chief portion of Mellstock parish choir.

The first was a bowed and bent man, who carried a fiddle under his arm, and walked as if engaged in studying some subject connected with the surface of the road. He was Michael Mail, the man who had halloed to Dick.

The next was Mr. Robert Penny, boot- and shoemaker; a little man, who, though rather round-shouldered, walked as if that fact had not come to his own knowledge, moving on with his back very hollow and his face fixed on the north-east quarter of the heavens before him, so that his lower waist-coat-buttons came first, and then the remainder of his figure. His features were invisible; yet when he occasionally looked round, two faint moons of light gleamed for an instant from the precincts of his eyes, denoting that he wore spectacles of a circular form.

The third was Elias Spinks, who walked perpendicularly and dramatically. The fourth outline was Joseph Bowman's, who had now no distinctive appearance beyond that of a human being. Finally came a weak lath-like form, trotting and stumbling along with one shoulder forward and his head inclined to the left, his arms dangling nervelessly in the wind as if they were empty sleeves. This was Thomas Leaf.

"Where be the boys?" said Dick to this somewhat indifferently-matched assembly.

The eldest of the group, Michael Mail, cleared his throat from a great depth.

"We told them to keep back at home for a time, thinken they wouldn't be wanted yet awhile; and we could choose the tuens, and so on."

"Father and grandfather William have expected ye a little sooner. I have just been for a run round by Ewelease Stile and Hollow Hill to warm my feet."

"To be sure father did! To be sure 'a did expect us — to taste the little barrel beyond compare that he's going to tap."

"'Od rabbit it all! Never heard a word of it!" said Mr. Penny, gleams of delight appearing upon his spectacle-glasses, Dick meanwhile singing parenthetically —

"The lads and the lasses a-sheep-shearing go."

"Neighbours, there's time enough to drink a sight of drink now afore bedtime?" said Mail.

"True, true — time enough to get as drunk as lords!" replied Bowman cheerfully.

This opinion being taken as convincing they all advanced between the varying hedges and the trees dotting them here and there, kicking their toes occasionally among the crumpled leaves. Soon appeared glimmering indications of the few cottages forming the small hamlet of Upper Mellstock for which they were bound, whilst the faint sound of church-bells ringing a Christmas peal could be heard floating over upon the breeze from the direction of Longpuddle and Weatherbury parishes on the other side of the hills. A little wicket admitted them to the garden, and they proceeded up the path to Dick's house.

Stinsford Church, Dorset – the inspiration of Mellstock church

CHAPTER II:

THE TRANTER'S

It was a long low cottage with a hipped roof of thatch, having dormer windows breaking up into the eaves, a chimney standing in the middle of the ridge and another at each end. The window-shutters were not yet closed, and the fire- and candle-light within radiated forth upon the thick bushes of box and laurestinus growing in clumps outside, and upon the bare boughs of several codlin-trees hanging about in various distorted shapes, the result of early training as espaliers combined with careless climbing into their boughs in later years. The walls of the dwelling were for the most part covered with creepers, though these were rather beaten back from the doorway — a feature which was worn and scratched by much passing in and out, giving it by day the appearance of an old keyhole. Light streamed through the cracks and joints of outbuildings a little way from the cottage, a sight which nourished a fancy that the purpose of the erection must be rather to veil bright attractions than to shelter unsightly necessities. The noise of a beetle and wedges and the splintering of wood was periodically heard from this direction; and at some little distance further a steady regular munching and the occasional scurr of a rope betokened a stable, and horses feeding within it.

The choir stamped severally on the door-stone to shake from their boots any fragment of earth or leaf adhering thereto, then entered the house and looked around to survey the condition of things. Through the open doorway of a small inner room on the right hand, of a character between pantry and cellar, was Dick Dewy's father Reuben, by vocation a "tranter," or irregular carrier. He was a stout florid man about forty years of age, who surveyed people up and down when first making their acquaintance, and generally smiled at the horizon or other distant object during conversations with friends, walking about with a steady sway, and turning out his toes very considerably. Being now occupied in bending over a hogshead, that stood in the pantry ready horsed for the process of broaching, he did not take the trouble to turn or raise his eyes at the entry of his visitors, well knowing by their footsteps that they were the expected old comrades.

The main room, on the left, was decked with bunches of holly and other evergreens, and from the middle of the beam bisecting the ceiling hung the mistletoe, of a size out of all proportion to the room, and extending so low that it became necessary for a full-grown person to walk round it in passing, or run the risk of entangling his hair. This apartment contained Mrs. Dewy the tranter's wife, and the four remaining children, Susan, Jim, Bessy, and Charley, graduating uniformly though at wide stages from the age of sixteen to that of four years — the eldest of the series being separated from Dick the firstborn by a nearly equal interval.

Some circumstance had apparently caused much grief to Charley just previous to the entry of the choir, and he had absently taken down a small looking-glass, holding it before his face to learn how the human countenance appeared when engaged in crying, which survey led him to pause at the various points in each wail that were more than ordinarily striking, for a thorough appreciation of the general effect. Bessy was leaning against a chair, and glancing under the plaits about the waist of the plaid frock she

wore, to notice the original unfaded pattern of the material as there preserved, her face bearing an expression of regret that the brightness had passed away from the visible portions. Mrs. Dewy sat in a brown settle by the side of the glowing wood fire — so glowing that with a heedful compression of the lips she would now and then rise and put her hand upon the hams and fitches of bacon lining the chimney, to reassure herself that they were not being broiled instead of smoked — a misfortune that had been known to happen now and then at Christmas-time.

“Hullo, my sonnies, here you be, then!” said Reuben Dewy at length, standing up and blowing forth a vehement gust of breath. “How the blood do puff up in anybody’s head, to be sure, a-stooping like that! I was just going out to gate to hark for ye.” He then carefully began to wind a strip of brown paper round a brass tap he held in his hand. “This in the cask here is a drop o’ the right sort” (tapping the cask); “‘tis a real drop o’ cordial from the best picked apples — Sansoms, Stubbards, Five-corners, and such-like — you d’mind the sort, Michael?” (Michael nodded.) “And there’s a sprinkling of they that grow down by the orchard-rails — streaked ones — rail apples we d’call ‘em, as ‘tis by the rails they grow, and not knowing the right name. The water-cider from ‘em is as good as most people’s best cider is.”

“Ay, and of the same make too,” said Bowman. “‘It rained when we wrung it out, and the water got into it,’ folk will say. But ‘tis on’y an excuse. Watered cider is too common among us.”

“Yes, yes; too common it is!” said Spinks with an inward sigh, whilst his eyes seemed to be looking at the case in an abstract form rather than at the scene before him. “Such poor liquor do make a man’s throat feel very melancholy — and is a disgrace to the name of stimmilent.”

“Come in, come in, and draw up to the fire; never mind your shoes,” said Mrs. Dewy, seeing that all except Dick had paused to wipe them upon the door-mat. “I am glad that you’ve stepped up-along at last; and, Susan, you run down to Grammer Kaytes’s and see if you can borrow some larger candles than these fourteens. Tommy Leaf, don’t ye be afeard! Come and sit here in the settle.”

This was addressed to the young man before mentioned, consisting chiefly of a human skeleton and a smock-frock, who was very awkward in his movements, apparently on account of having grown so very fast that before he had had time to get used to his height he was higher.

“Hee — hee — ay!” replied Leaf, letting his mouth continue to smile for some time after his mind had done smiling, so that his teeth remained in view as the most conspicuous members of his body.

“Here, Mr. Penny,” resumed Mrs. Dewy, “you sit in this chair. And how’s your daughter, Mrs. Brownjohn?”

“Well, I suppose I must say pretty fair.” He adjusted his spectacles a quarter of an inch to the right. “But she’ll be worse before she’s better, ‘a b’lieve.”

“Indeed — poor soul! And how many will that make in all, four or five?”

“Five; they’ve buried three. Yes, five; and she not much more than a maid yet. She do know the multiplication table onmistakable well. However, ‘twas to be, and none can gainsay it.”

Mrs. Dewy resigned Mr. Penny. “Wonder where your grandfather James is?” she inquired of one of the children. “He said he’d drop in to-night.”

“Out in fuel-house with grandfather William,” said Jimmy.

“Now let’s see what we can do,” was heard spoken about this time by the tranter in a private voice to the barrel, beside which he had again established himself, and was stooping to cut away the cork.

“Reuben, don’t make such a mess o’ tapping that barrel as is mostly made in this house,” Mrs. Dewy cried from the fireplace. “I’d tap a hundred without wasting more than you do in one. Such a squizzling and squirting job as ‘tis in your hands! There, he always was such a clumsy man indoors.”

“Ay, ay; I know you’d tap a hundred beautiful, Ann — I know you would; two hundred, perhaps. But I can’t promise. This is a’ old cask, and the wood’s rotted away about the tap-hole. The husbird of a feller Sam Lawson — that ever I should call’n such, now he’s dead and gone, poor heart! — took me in completely upon the feat of buying this cask. ‘Reub,’ says he — ‘a always used to call me plain Reub, poor old heart! — ‘Reub,’ he said, says he, ‘that there cask, Reub, is as good as new; yes, good as new. ‘Tis a wine-hogshead; the best port-wine in the commonwealth have been in that there cask; and you shall have en for ten shillens, Reub,’ — ‘a said, says he — ‘he’s worth twenty, ay, five-and-twenty, if he’s worth one; and an iron hoop or two put round en among the wood ones will make en worth thirty shillens of any man’s money, if — ’”

“I think I should have used the eyes that Providence gave me to use afore I paid any ten shillens for a jimcrack wine-barrel; a saint is sinner enough not to be cheated. But ‘tis like all your family was, so easy to be deceived.”

“That’s as true as gospel of this member,” said Reuben.

Mrs. Dewy began a smile at the answer, then altering her lips and refolding them so that it was not a smile, commenced smoothing little Bessy’s hair; the tranter having meanwhile suddenly become oblivious to conversation, occupying himself in a deliberate cutting and arrangement of some more brown paper for the broaching operation.

“Ah, who can believe sellers!” said old Michael Mail in a carefully-cautious voice, by way of tiding-over this critical point of affairs.

“No one at all,” said Joseph Bowman, in the tone of a man fully agreeing with everybody.

“Ay,” said Mail, in the tone of a man who did not agree with everybody as a rule, though he did now; “I knowed a’ auctioneering feller once — a very friendly feller ‘a was too. And so one hot day as I was walking down the front street o’ Casterbridge, jist below the King’s Arms, I passed a’ open winder and see him inside, stuck upon his perch, a-selling off. I jist nodded to en in a friendly way as I passed, and went my way, and thought no more about it. Well, next day, as I was oilen my boots by fuel-house

door, if a letter didn't come wi' a bill charging me with a feather-bed, bolster, and pillers, that I had bid for at Mr. Taylor's sale. The slim-faced martel had knocked 'em down to me because I nodded to en in my friendly way; and I had to pay for 'em too. Now, I hold that that was coming it very close, Reuben?"

"'Twas close, there's no denying," said the general voice.

"Too close, 'twas," said Reuben, in the rear of the rest. "And as to Sam Lawson — poor heart! now he's dead and gone too! — I'll warrant, that if so be I've spent one hour in making hoops for that barrel, I've spent fifty, first and last. That's one of my hoops" — touching it with his elbow — "that's one of mine, and that, and that, and all these."

"Ah, Sam was a man," said Mr. Penny, contemplatively.

"Sam was!" said Bowman.

"Especially for a drap o' drink," said the tranter.

"Good, but not religious-good," suggested Mr. Penny.

The tranter nodded. Having at last made the tap and hole quite ready, "Now then, Suze, bring a mug," he said. "Here's luck to us, my sonnies!"

The tap went in, and the cider immediately squirted out in a horizontal shower over Reuben's hands, knees, and leggings, and into the eyes and neck of Charley, who, having temporarily put off his grief under pressure of more interesting proceedings, was squatting down and blinking near his father.

"There 'tis again!" said Mrs. Dewy.

"Devil take the hole, the cask, and Sam Lawson too, that good cider should be wasted like this!" exclaimed the tranter. "Your thumb! Lend me your thumb, Michael! Ram it in here, Michael! I must get a bigger tap, my sonnies."

"'Idd it cold inthide te hole?" inquired Charley of Michael, as he continued in a stooping posture with his thumb in the cork-hole.

"What wonderful odds and ends that chiel has in his head to be sure!" Mrs. Dewy admiringly exclaimed from the distance. "I lay a wager that he thinks more about how 'tis inside that barrel than in all the other parts of the world put together."

All persons present put on a speaking countenance of admiration for the cleverness alluded to, in the midst of which Reuben returned. The operation was then satisfactorily performed; when Michael arose and stretched his head to the extremest fraction of height that his body would allow of, to re-straighten his back and shoulders — thrusting out his arms and twisting his features to a mass of wrinkles to emphasize the relief acquired. A quart or two of the beverage was then brought to table, at which all the new arrivals reseated themselves with wide-spread knees, their eyes meditatively seeking out any speck or knot in the board upon which the gaze might precipitate itself.

"Whatever is father a-biding out in fuel-house so long for?" said the tranter. "Never such a man as father for two things — cleaving up old dead apple-tree wood and playing the bass-viol. 'A'd pass his life between the two, that 'a would." He stepped to the door and opened it.

"Father!"

“Ay!” rang thinly from round the corner.

“Here’s the barrel tapped, and we all a-waiting!”

A series of dull thuds, that had been heard without for some time past, now ceased; and after the light of a lantern had passed the window and made wheeling rays upon the ceiling inside the eldest of the Dewy family appeared.

CHAPTER III:

THE ASSEMBLED QUIRE

William Dewy — otherwise grandfather William — was now about seventy; yet an ardent vitality still preserved a warm and roughened bloom upon his face, which reminded gardeners of the sunny side of a ripe ribstone-pippin; though a narrow strip of forehead, that was protected from the weather by lying above the line of his hat-brim, seemed to belong to some town man, so gentlemanly was its whiteness. His was a humorous and kindly nature, not unmixed with a frequent melancholy; and he had a firm religious faith. But to his neighbours he had no character in particular. If they saw him pass by their windows when they had been bottling off old mead, or when they had just been called long-headed men who might do anything in the world if they chose, they thought concerning him, “Ah, there’s that good-hearted man — open as a child!” If they saw him just after losing a shilling or half-a-crown, or accidentally letting fall a piece of crockery, they thought, “There’s that poor weak-minded man Dewy again! Ah, he’s never done much in the world either!” If he passed when fortune neither smiled nor frowned on them, they merely thought him old William Dewy.

“Ah, so’s — here you be! — Ah, Michael and Joseph and John — and you too, Leaf! a merry Christmas all! We shall have a rare log-wood fire directly, Reub, to reckon by the toughness of the job I had in cleaving ‘em.” As he spoke he threw down an armful of logs which fell in the chimney-corner with a rumble, and looked at them with something of the admiring enmity he would have bestowed on living people who had been very obstinate in holding their own. “Come in, grandfather James.”

Old James (grandfather on the maternal side) had simply called as a visitor. He lived in a cottage by himself, and many people considered him a miser; some, rather slovenly in his habits. He now came forward from behind grandfather William, and his stooping figure formed a well-illuminated picture as he passed towards the fireplace. Being by trade a mason, he wore a long linen apron reaching almost to his toes, corduroy breeches and gaiters, which, together with his boots, graduated in tints of whitish-brown by constant friction against lime and stone. He also wore a very stiff fustian coat, having folds at the elbows and shoulders as unvarying in their arrangement as those in a pair of bellows: the ridges and the projecting parts of the coat collectively exhibiting a shade different from that of the hollows, which were lined with small ditch-like accumulations of stone and mortar-dust. The extremely large side-pockets, sheltered beneath wide flaps, bulged out convexly whether empty or full; and as he

was often engaged to work at buildings far away — his breakfasts and dinners being eaten in a strange chimney-corner, by a garden wall, on a heap of stones, or walking along the road — he carried in these pockets a small tin canister of butter, a small canister of sugar, a small canister of tea, a paper of salt, and a paper of pepper; the bread, cheese, and meat, forming the substance of his meals, hanging up behind him in his basket among the hammers and chisels. If a passer-by looked hard at him when he was drawing forth any of these, “My buttery,” he said, with a pinched smile.

“Better try over number seventy-eight before we start, I suppose?” said William, pointing to a heap of old Christmas-carol books on a side table.

“Wi’ all my heart,” said the choir generally.

“Number seventy-eight was always a teaser — always. I can mind him ever since I was growing up a hard boy-chap.”

“But he’s a good tune, and worth a mint o’ practice,” said Michael.

“He is; though I’ve been mad enough wi’ that tune at times to seize en and tear en all to linnit. Ay, he’s a splendid carrel — there’s no denying that.”

“The first line is well enough,” said Mr. Spinks; “but when you come to ‘O, thou man,’ you make a mess o’t.”

“We’ll have another go into en, and see what we can make of the martel. Half-an-hour’s hammering at en will conquer the toughness of en; I’ll warn it.”

“‘Od rabbit it all!” said Mr. Penny, interrupting with a flash of his spectacles, and at the same time clawing at something in the depths of a large side-pocket. “If so be I hadn’t been as scatter-brained and thirtingill as a chiel, I should have called at the schoolhouse wi’ a boot as I cam up along. Whatever is coming to me I really can’t estimate at all!”

“The brain has its weaknesses,” murmured Mr. Spinks, waving his head ominously. Mr. Spinks was considered to be a scholar, having once kept a night-school, and always spoke up to that level.

“Well, I must call with en the first thing to-morrow. And I’ll empt my pocket o’ this last too, if you don’t mind, Mrs. Dewy.” He drew forth a last, and placed it on a table at his elbow. The eyes of three or four followed it.

“Well,” said the shoemaker, seeming to perceive that the interest the object had excited was greater than he had anticipated, and warranted the last’s being taken up again and exhibited; “now, whose foot do ye suppose this last was made for? It was made for Geoffrey Day’s father, over at Yalbury Wood. Ah, many’s the pair o’ boots he’ve had off the last! Well, when ‘a died, I used the last for Geoffrey, and have ever since, though a little doctoring was wanted to make it do. Yes, a very queer natured last it is now, ‘a b’lieve,” he continued, turning it over caressingly. “Now, you notice that there” (pointing to a lump of leather bradded to the toe), “that’s a very bad bunion that he’ve had ever since ‘a was a boy. Now, this remarkable large piece” (pointing to a patch nailed to the side), “shows a’ accident he received by the tread of a horse, that squashed his foot a’most to a pomace. The horseshoe cam full-butt on this point, you

see. And so I've just been over to Geoffrey's, to know if he wanted his bunion altered or made bigger in the new pair I'm making."

During the latter part of this speech, Mr. Penny's left hand wandered towards the cider-cup, as if the hand had no connection with the person speaking; and bringing his sentence to an abrupt close, all but the extreme margin of the bootmaker's face was eclipsed by the circular brim of the vessel.

"However, I was going to say," continued Penny, putting down the cup, "I ought to have called at the school" — here he went groping again in the depths of his pocket — "to leave this without fail, though I suppose the first thing to-morrow will do."

He now drew forth and placed upon the table a boot — small, light, and prettily shaped — upon the heel of which he had been operating.

"The new schoolmistress's!"

"Ay, no less, Miss Fancy Day; as neat a little figure of fun as ever I see, and just husband-high."

"Never Geoffrey's daughter Fancy?" said Bowman, as all glances present converged like wheel-spokes upon the boot in the centre of them.

"Yes, sure," resumed Mr. Penny, regarding the boot as if that alone were his auditor; "'tis she that's come here schoolmistress. You knowed his daughter was in training?"

"Strange, isn't it, for her to be here Christmas night, Master Penny?"

"Yes; but here she is, 'a b'lieve."

"I know how she comes here — so I do!" chirruped one of the children.

"Why?" Dick inquired, with subtle interest.

"Pa'son Maybold was afraid he couldn't manage us all to-morrow at the dinner, and he talked o' getting her jist to come over and help him hand about the plates, and see we didn't make pigs of ourselves; and that's what she's come for!"

"And that's the boot, then," continued its mender imaginatively, "that she'll walk to church in to-morrow morning. I don't care to mend boots I don't make; but there's no knowing what it may lead to, and her father always comes to me."

There, between the cider-mug and the candle, stood this interesting receptacle of the little unknown's foot; and a very pretty boot it was. A character, in fact — the flexible bend at the instep, the rounded localities of the small nestling toes, scratches from careless scampers now forgotten — all, as repeated in the tell-tale leather, evidencing a nature and a bias. Dick surveyed it with a delicate feeling that he had no right to do so without having first asked the owner of the foot's permission.

"Now, neighbours, though no common eye can see it," the shoemaker went on, "a man in the trade can see the likeness between this boot and that last, although that is so deformed as hardly to recall one of God's creatures, and this is one of as pretty a pair as you'd get for ten-and-sixpence in Casterbridge. To you, nothing; but 'tis father's voot and daughter's voot to me, as plain as houses."

"I don't doubt there's a likeness, Master Penny — a mild likeness — a fantastical likeness," said Spinks. "But I han't got imagination enough to see it, perhaps."

Mr. Penny adjusted his spectacles.

“Now, I’ll tell ye what happened to me once on this very point. You used to know Johnson the dairyman, William?”

“Ay, sure; I did.”

“Well, ‘twasn’t opposite his house, but a little lower down — by his paddock, in front o’ Parkmaze Pool. I was a-bearing across towards Bloom’s End, and lo and behold, there was a man just brought out o’ the Pool, dead; he had un’rayed for a dip, but not being able to pitch it just there had gone in flop over his head. Men looked at en; women looked at en; children looked at en; nobody knowed en. He was covered wi’ a sheet; but I caught sight of his voot, just showing out as they carried en along. ‘I don’t care what name that man went by,’ I said, in my way, ‘but he’s John Woodward’s brother; I can swear to the family voot.’ At that very moment up comes John Woodward, weeping and teaving, ‘I’ve lost my brother! I’ve lost my brother!’”

“Only to think of that!” said Mrs. Dewy.

“‘Tis well enough to know this foot and that foot,” said Mr. Spinks. “‘Tis long-headed, in fact, as far as feet do go. I know little, ‘tis true — I say no more; but show me a man’s foot, and I’ll tell you that man’s heart.”

“You must be a cleverer feller, then, than mankind in jeneral,” said the tranter.

“Well, that’s nothing for me to speak of,” returned Mr. Spinks. “A man lives and learns. Maybe I’ve read a leaf or two in my time. I don’t wish to say anything large, mind you; but nevertheless, maybe I have.”

“Yes, I know,” said Michael soothingly, “and all the parish knows, that ye’ve read sommat of everything a’most, and have been a great filler of young folks’ brains. Learning’s a worthy thing, and ye’ve got it, Master Spinks.”

“I make no boast, though I may have read and thought a little; and I know — it may be from much perusing, but I make no boast — that by the time a man’s head is finished, ‘tis almost time for him to creep underground. I am over forty-five.”

Mr. Spinks emitted a look to signify that if his head was not finished, nobody’s head ever could be.

“Talk of knowing people by their feet!” said Reuben. “Rot me, my sonnies, then, if I can tell what a man is from all his members put together, oftentimes.”

“But still, look is a good deal,” observed grandfather William absently, moving and balancing his head till the tip of grandfather James’s nose was exactly in a right line with William’s eye and the mouth of a miniature cavern he was discerning in the fire. “By the way,” he continued in a fresher voice, and looking up, “that young crater, the schoolmis’ess, must be sung to to-night wi’ the rest? If her ear is as fine as her face, we shall have enough to do to be up-sides with her.”

“What about her face?” said young Dewy.

“Well, as to that,” Mr. Spinks replied, “‘tis a face you can hardly gainsay. A very good pink face, as far as that do go. Still, only a face, when all is said and done.”

“Come, come, Elias Spinks, say she’s a pretty maid, and have done wi’ her,” said the tranter, again preparing to visit the cider-barrel.

CHAPTER IV:

GOING THE ROUNDS

Shortly after ten o'clock the singing-boys arrived at the tranter's house, which was invariably the place of meeting, and preparations were made for the start. The older men and musicians wore thick coats, with stiff perpendicular collars, and coloured handkerchiefs wound round and round the neck till the end came to hand, over all which they just showed their ears and noses, like people looking over a wall. The remainder, stalwart ruddy men and boys, were dressed mainly in snow-white smock-frocks, embroidered upon the shoulders and breasts, in ornamental forms of hearts, diamonds, and zigzags. The cider-mug was emptied for the ninth time, the music-books were arranged, and the pieces finally decided upon. The boys in the meantime put the old horn-lanterns in order, cut candles into short lengths to fit the lanterns; and, a thin fleece of snow having fallen since the early part of the evening, those who had no leggings went to the stable and wound wisps of hay round their ankles to keep the insidious flakes from the interior of their boots.

Mellstock was a parish of considerable acreage, the hamlets composing it lying at a much greater distance from each other than is ordinarily the case. Hence several hours were consumed in playing and singing within hearing of every family, even if but a single air were bestowed on each. There was Lower Mellstock, the main village; half a mile from this were the church and vicarage, and a few other houses, the spot being rather lonely now, though in past centuries it had been the most thickly-populated quarter of the parish. A mile north-east lay the hamlet of Upper Mellstock, where the tranter lived; and at other points knots of cottages, besides solitary farmsteads and dairies.

Old William Dewy, with the violoncello, played the bass; his grandson Dick the treble violin; and Reuben and Michael Mail the tenor and second violins respectively. The singers consisted of four men and seven boys, upon whom devolved the task of carrying and attending to the lanterns, and holding the books open for the players. Directly music was the theme, old William ever and instinctively came to the front.

"Now mind, neighbours," he said, as they all went out one by one at the door, he himself holding it ajar and regarding them with a critical face as they passed, like a shepherd counting out his sheep. "You two counter-boys, keep your ears open to Michael's fingering, and don't ye go straying into the treble part along o' Dick and his set, as ye did last year; and mind this especially when we be in 'Arise, and hail.' Billy Chimlen, don't you sing quite so raving mad as you fain would; and, all o' ye, whatever ye do, keep from making a great scuffle on the ground when we go in at people's gates; but go quietly, so as to strike up all of a sudden, like spirits."

"Farmer Ledlow's first?"

"Farmer Ledlow's first; the rest as usual."

“And, Voss,” said the tranter terminatively, “you keep house here till about half-past two; then heat the metheglin and cider in the warmer you’ll find turned up upon the copper; and bring it wi’ the victuals to church-hatch, as th’st know.”

* * * * *

Just before the clock struck twelve they lighted the lanterns and started. The moon, in her third quarter, had risen since the snowstorm; but the dense accumulation of snow-cloud weakened her power to a faint twilight, which was rather pervasive of the landscape than traceable to the sky. The breeze had gone down, and the rustle of their feet and tones of their speech echoed with an alert rebound from every post, boundary-stone, and ancient wall they passed, even where the distance of the echo’s origin was less than a few yards. Beyond their own slight noises nothing was to be heard, save the occasional bark of foxes in the direction of Yalbury Wood, or the brush of a rabbit among the grass now and then, as it scampered out of their way.

Most of the outlying homesteads and hamlets had been visited by about two o’clock; they then passed across the outskirts of a wooded park toward the main village, nobody being at home at the Manor. Pursuing no recognized track, great care was necessary in walking lest their faces should come in contact with the low-hanging boughs of the old lime-trees, which in many spots formed dense over-growths of interlaced branches.

“Times have changed from the times they used to be,” said Mail, regarding nobody can tell what interesting old panoramas with an inward eye, and letting his outward glance rest on the ground, because it was as convenient a position as any. “People don’t care much about us now! I’ve been thinking we must be almost the last left in the county of the old string players? Barrel-organs, and the things next door to ‘em that you blow wi’ your foot, have come in terribly of late years.”

“Ay!” said Bowman, shaking his head; and old William, on seeing him, did the same thing.

“More’s the pity,” replied another. “Time was — long and merry ago now! — when not one of the varmits was to be heard of; but it served some of the quires right. They should have stuck to strings as we did, and kept out clarinets, and done away with serpents. If you’d thrive in musical religion, stick to strings, says I.”

“Strings be safe soul-lifters, as far as that do go,” said Mr. Spinks.

“Yet there’s worse things than serpents,” said Mr. Penny. “Old things pass away, ‘tis true; but a serpent was a good old note: a deep rich note was the serpent.”

“Clar’nets, however, be bad at all times,” said Michael Mail. “One Christmas — years ago now, years — I went the rounds wi’ the Weatherbury quire. ‘Twas a hard frosty night, and the keys of all the clar’nets froze — ah, they did freeze! — so that ‘twas like drawing a cork every time a key was opened; and the players o’ ‘em had to go into a hedger-and-ditcher’s chimley-corner, and thaw their clar’nets every now and then. An icicle o’ spet hung down from the end of every man’s clar’net a span long; and as to fingers — well, there, if ye’ll believe me, we had no fingers at all, to our knowing.”

“I can well bring back to my mind,” said Mr. Penny, “what I said to poor Joseph Ryme (who took the treble part in Chalk-Newton Church for two-and-forty year) when they thought of having clar’nets there. ‘Joseph,’ I said, says I, ‘depend upon’t, if so be you have them tooting clar’nets you’ll spoil the whole set-out. Clar’nets were not made for the service of the Lard; you can see it by looking at ‘em,’ I said. And what came o’t? Why, souls, the parson set up a barrel-organ on his own account within two years o’ the time I spoke, and the old quire went to nothing.”

“As far as look is concerned,” said the tranter, “I don’t for my part see that a fiddle is much nearer heaven than a clar’net. ‘Tis further off. There’s always a rakish, scampish twist about a fiddle’s looks that seems to say the Wicked One had a hand in making o’en; while angels be supposed to play clar’nets in heaven, or som’at like ‘em, if ye may believe picters.”

“Robert Penny, you was in the right,” broke in the eldest Dewy. “They should ha’ stuck to strings. Your brass-man is a rafting dog — well and good; your reed-man is a dab at stirring ye — well and good; your drum-man is a rare bowel-shaker — good again. But I don’t care who hears me say it, nothing will spak to your heart wi’ the sweetness o’ the man of strings!”

“Strings for ever!” said little Jimmy.

“Strings alone would have held their ground against all the new comers in creation.” (“True, true!” said Bowman.) “But clarinets was death.” (“Death they was!” said Mr. Penny.) “And harmonions,” William continued in a louder voice, and getting excited by these signs of approval, “harmonions and barrel-organs” (“Ah!” and groans from Spinks) “be miserable — what shall I call ‘em? — miserable — ”

“Sinners,” suggested Jimmy, who made large strides like the men, and did not lag behind like the other little boys.

“Miserable dumbledores!”

“Right, William, and so they be — miserable dumbledores!” said the choir with unanimity.

By this time they were crossing to a gate in the direction of the school, which, standing on a slight eminence at the junction of three ways, now rose in unvarying and dark flatness against the sky. The instruments were retuned, and all the band entered the school enclosure, enjoined by old William to keep upon the grass.

“Number seventy-eight,” he softly gave out as they formed round in a semicircle, the boys opening the lanterns to get a clearer light, and directing their rays on the books.

Then passed forth into the quiet night an ancient and time-worn hymn, embodying a quaint Christianity in words orally transmitted from father to son through several generations down to the present characters, who sang them out right earnestly:

“Remember Adam’s fall,
O thou Man:
Remember Adam’s fall
From Heaven to Hell.
Remember Adam’s fall;

How he hath condemn'd all
 In Hell perpetual
 There for to dwell.
 Remember God's goodnesse,
 O thou Man:
 Remember God's goodnesse,
 His promise made.
 Remember God's goodnesse;
 He sent His Son sinlesse
 Our ails for to redress;
 Be not afraid!
 In Bethlehem He was born,
 O thou Man:
 In Bethlehem He was born,
 For mankind's sake.
 In Bethlehem He was born,
 Christmas-day i' the morn:
 Our Saviour thought no scorn
 Our faults to take.
 Give thanks to God alway,
 O thou Man:
 Give thanks to God alway
 With heart-most joy.
 Give thanks to God alway
 On this our joyful day:
 Let all men sing and say,
 Holy, Holy!"

Having concluded the last note, they listened for a minute or two, but found that no sound issued from the schoolhouse.

"Four breaths, and then, 'O, what unbounded goodness!' number fifty-nine," said William.

This was duly gone through, and no notice whatever seemed to be taken of the performance.

"Good guide us, surely 'tisn't a' empty house, as befell us in the year thirty-nine and forty-three!" said old Dewy.

"Perhaps she's jist come from some musical city, and sneers at our doings?" the tranter whispered.

"'Od rabbit her!" said Mr. Penny, with an annihilating look at a corner of the school chimney, "I don't quite stomach her, if this is it. Your plain music well done is as worthy as your other sort done bad, a' b'lieve, souls; so say I."

"Four breaths, and then the last," said the leader authoritatively. "'Rejoice, ye Tenants of the Earth,' number sixty-four."

At the close, waiting yet another minute, he said in a clear loud voice, as he had said in the village at that hour and season for the previous forty years — "A merry Christmas to ye!"

CHAPTER V:

THE LISTENERS

When the expectant stillness consequent upon the exclamation had nearly died out of them all, an increasing light made itself visible in one of the windows of the upper floor. It came so close to the blind that the exact position of the flame could be perceived from the outside. Remaining steady for an instant, the blind went upward from before it, revealing to thirty concentrated eyes a young girl, framed as a picture by the window architrave, and unconsciously illuminating her countenance to a vivid brightness by a candle she held in her left hand, close to her face, her right hand being extended to the side of the window. She was wrapped in a white robe of some kind, whilst down her shoulders fell a twining profusion of marvellously rich hair, in a wild disorder which proclaimed it to be only during the invisible hours of the night that such a condition was discoverable. Her bright eyes were looking into the grey world outside with an uncertain expression, oscillating between courage and shyness, which, as she recognized the semicircular group of dark forms gathered before her, transformed itself into pleasant resolution.

Opening the window, she said lightly and warmly — "Thank you, singers, thank you!"

Together went the window quickly and quietly, and the blind started downward on its return to its place. Her fair forehead and eyes vanished; her little mouth; her neck and shoulders; all of her. Then the spot of candlelight shone nebulously as before; then it moved away.

"How pretty!" exclaimed Dick Dewy.

"If she'd been rale wexwork she couldn't ha' been comelier," said Michael Mail.

"As near a thing to a spiritual vision as ever I wish to see!" said tranter Dewy.

"O, sich I never, never see!" said Leaf fervently.

All the rest, after clearing their throats and adjusting their hats, agreed that such a sight was worth singing for.

"Now to Farmer Shiner's, and then replenish our insides, father?" said the tranter.

"Wi' all my heart," said old William, shouldering his bass-viol.

Farmer Shiner's was a queer lump of a house, standing at the corner of a lane that ran into the principal thoroughfare. The upper windows were much wider than they were high, and this feature, together with a broad bay-window where the door might have been expected, gave it by day the aspect of a human countenance turned askance, and wearing a sly and wicked leer. To-night nothing was visible but the outline of the roof upon the sky.

The front of this building was reached, and the preliminaries arranged as usual.

“Four breaths, and number thirty-two, ‘Behold the Morning Star,’” said old William.

They had reached the end of the second verse, and the fiddlers were doing the up bow-stroke previously to pouring forth the opening chord of the third verse, when, without a light appearing or any signal being given, a roaring voice exclaimed —

“Shut up, woll ‘ee! Don’t make your blaring row here! A feller wi’ a headache enough to split his skull likes a quiet night!”

Slam went the window.

“Hullo, that’s a’ ugly blow for we!” said the tranter, in a keenly appreciative voice, and turning to his companions.

“Finish the carrel, all who be friends of harmony!” commanded old William; and they continued to the end.

“Four breaths, and number nineteen!” said William firmly. “Give it him well; the quire can’t be insulted in this manner!”

A light now flashed into existence, the window opened, and the farmer stood revealed as one in a terrific passion.

“Drown en! — drown en!” the tranter cried, fiddling frantically. “Play fortissimy, and drown his spaking!”

“Fortissimy!” said Michael Mail, and the music and singing waxed so loud that it was impossible to know what Mr. Shiner had said, was saying, or was about to say; but wildly flinging his arms and body about in the forms of capital Xs and Ys, he appeared to utter enough invectives to consign the whole parish to perdition.

“Very onseemly — very!” said old William, as they retired. “Never such a dreadful scene in the whole round o’ my carrel practice — never! And he a churchwarden!”

“Only a drap o’ drink got into his head,” said the tranter. “Man’s well enough when he’s in his religious frame. He’s in his worldly frame now. Must ask en to our bit of a party to-morrow night, I suppose, and so put en in humour again. We bear no mortal man ill-will.”

They now crossed Mellstock Bridge, and went along an embowered path beside the Froom towards the church and vicarage, meeting Voss with the hot mead and bread-and-cheese as they were approaching the churchyard. This determined them to eat and drink before proceeding further, and they entered the church and ascended to the gallery. The lanterns were opened, and the whole body sat round against the walls on benches and whatever else was available, and made a hearty meal. In the pauses of conversation there could be heard through the floor overhead a little world of undertones and creaks from the halting clockwork, which never spread further than the tower they were born in, and raised in the more meditative minds a fancy that here lay the direct pathway of Time.

Having done eating and drinking, they again tuned the instruments, and once more the party emerged into the night air.

“Where’s Dick?” said old Dewy.

Every man looked round upon every other man, as if Dick might have been transmuted into one or the other; and then they said they didn't know.

"Well now, that's what I call very nasty of Master Dicky, that I do," said Michael Mail.

"He've clinked off home-along, depend upon't," another suggested, though not quite believing that he had.

"Dick!" exclaimed the tranter, and his voice rolled sonorously forth among the yews.

He suspended his muscles rigid as stone whilst listening for an answer, and finding he listened in vain, turned to the assemblage.

"The treble man too! Now if he'd been a tenor or counter chap, we might ha' contrived the rest o't without en, you see. But for a quire to lose the treble, why, my sonnies, you may so well lose your . . ." The tranter paused, unable to mention an image vast enough for the occasion.

"Your head at once," suggested Mr. Penny.

The tranter moved a pace, as if it were puerile of people to complete sentences when there were more pressing things to be done.

"Was ever heard such a thing as a young man leaving his work half done and turning tail like this!"

"Never," replied Bowman, in a tone signifying that he was the last man in the world to wish to withhold the formal finish required of him.

"I hope no fatal tragedy has overtook the lad!" said his grandfather.

"O no," replied tranter Dewy placidly. "Wonder where he's put that there fiddle of his. Why that fiddle cost thirty shillings, and good words besides. Somewhere in the damp, without doubt; that instrument will be unglued and spoilt in ten minutes — ten! ay, two."

"What in the name o' righteousness can have happened?" said old William, more uneasily. "Perhaps he's drowned!"

Leaving their lanterns and instruments in the belfry they retraced their steps along the waterside track. "A strapping lad like Dick d'know better than let anything happen onawares," Reuben remarked. "There's sure to be some poor little scam reason for't staring us in the face all the while." He lowered his voice to a mysterious tone: "Neighbours, have ye noticed any sign of a scornful woman in his head, or suchlike?"

"Not a glimmer of such a body. He's as clear as water yet."

"And Dicky said he should never marry," cried Jimmy, "but live at home always along wi' mother and we!"

"Ay, ay, my sonny; every lad has said that in his time."

They had now again reached the precincts of Mr. Shiner's, but hearing nobody in that direction, one or two went across to the schoolhouse. A light was still burning in the bedroom, and though the blind was down, the window had been slightly opened, as if to admit the distant notes of the carollers to the ears of the occupant of the room.

Opposite the window, leaning motionless against a beech tree, was the lost man, his arms folded, his head thrown back, his eyes fixed upon the illuminated lattice.

“Why, Dick, is that thee? What b’st doing here?”

Dick’s body instantly flew into a more rational attitude, and his head was seen to turn east and west in the gloom, as if endeavouring to discern some proper answer to that question; and at last he said in rather feeble accents — ”Nothing, father.”

“Th’st take long enough time about it then, upon my body,” said the tranter, as they all turned anew towards the vicarage.

“I thought you hadn’t done having snap in the gallery,” said Dick.

“Why, we’ve been traypsing and rambling about, looking everywhere, and thinking you’d done fifty deathly things, and here have you been at nothing at all!”

“The stupidity lies in that point of it being nothing at all,” murmured Mr. Spinks.

The vicarage front was their next field of operation, and Mr. Maybold, the lately-arrived incumbent, duly received his share of the night’s harmonies. It was hoped that by reason of his profession he would have been led to open the window, and an extra carol in quick time was added to draw him forth. But Mr. Maybold made no stir.

“A bad sign!” said old William, shaking his head.

However, at that same instant a musical voice was heard exclaiming from inner depths of bedclothes — ”Thanks, villagers!”

“What did he say?” asked Bowman, who was rather dull of hearing. Bowman’s voice, being therefore loud, had been heard by the vicar within.

“I said, ‘Thanks, villagers!’” cried the vicar again.

“Oh, we didn’t hear ‘ee the first time!” cried Bowman.

“Now don’t for heaven’s sake spoil the young man’s temper by answering like that!” said the tranter.

“You won’t do that, my friends!” the vicar shouted.

“Well to be sure, what ears!” said Mr. Penny in a whisper. “Beats any horse or dog in the parish, and depend upon’t, that’s a sign he’s a proper clever chap.”

“We shall see that in time,” said the tranter.

Old William, in his gratitude for such thanks from a comparatively new inhabitant, was anxious to play all the tunes over again; but renounced his desire on being reminded by Reuben that it would be best to leave well alone.

“Now putting two and two together,” the tranter continued, as they went their way over the hill, and across to the last remaining houses; “that is, in the form of that young female vision we zeed just now, and this young tenor-voiced parson, my belief is she’ll wind en round her finger, and twist the pore young feller about like the figure of 8 — that she will so, my sonnies.”

CHAPTER VI:

CHRISTMAS MORNING

The choir at last reached their beds, and slept like the rest of the parish. Dick’s slumbers, through the three or four hours remaining for rest, were disturbed and slight;

an exhaustive variation upon the incidents that had passed that night in connection with the school-window going on in his brain every moment of the time.

In the morning, do what he would — go upstairs, downstairs, out of doors, speak of the wind and weather, or what not — he could not refrain from an unceasing renewal, in imagination, of that interesting enactment. Tilted on the edge of one foot he stood beside the fireplace, watching his mother grilling rashers; but there was nothing in grilling, he thought, unless the Vision grilled. The limp rasher hung down between the bars of the gridiron like a cat in a child's arms; but there was nothing in similes, unless She uttered them. He looked at the daylight shadows of a yellow hue, dancing with the firelight shadows in blue on the whitewashed chimney corner, but there was nothing in shadows. "Perhaps the new young wom — sch — Miss Fancy Day will sing in church with us this morning," he said.

The tranter looked a long time before he replied, "I fancy she will; and yet I fancy she won't."

Dick implied that such a remark was rather to be tolerated than admired; though deliberateness in speech was known to have, as a rule, more to do with the machinery of the tranter's throat than with the matter enunciated.

They made preparations for going to church as usual; Dick with extreme alacrity, though he would not definitely consider why he was so religious. His wonderful nicety in brushing and cleaning his best light boots had features which elevated it to the rank of an art. Every particle and speck of last week's mud was scraped and brushed from toe and heel; new blacking from the packet was carefully mixed and made use of, regardless of expense. A coat was laid on and polished; then another coat for increased blackness; and lastly a third, to give the perfect and mirror-like jet which the hoped-for rencounter demanded.

It being Christmas-day, the tranter prepared himself with Sunday particularity. Loud sousing and snorting noises were heard to proceed from a tub in the back quarters of the dwelling, proclaiming that he was there performing his great Sunday wash, lasting half-an-hour, to which his washings on working-day mornings were mere flashes in the pan. Vanishing into the outhouse with a large brown towel, and the above-named bubblings and snortings being carried on for about twenty minutes, the tranter would appear round the edge of the door, smelling like a summer fog, and looking as if he had just narrowly escaped a watery grave with the loss of much of his clothes, having since been weeping bitterly till his eyes were red; a crystal drop of water hanging ornamentally at the bottom of each ear, one at the tip of his nose, and others in the form of spangles about his hair.

After a great deal of crunching upon the sanded stone floor by the feet of father, son, and grandson as they moved to and fro in these preparations, the bass-viol and fiddles were taken from their nook, and the strings examined and screwed a little above concert-pitch, that they might keep their tone when the service began, to obviate the awkward contingency of having to retune them at the back of the gallery during a

cough, sneeze, or amen — an inconvenience which had been known to arise in damp wintry weather.

The three left the door and paced down Mellstock-lane and across the ewe-lease, bearing under their arms the instruments in faded green-baize bags, and old brown music-books in their hands; Dick continually finding himself in advance of the other two, and the tranter moving on with toes turned outwards to an enormous angle.

At the foot of an incline the church became visible through the north gate, or 'church hatch,' as it was called here. Seven agile figures in a clump were observable beyond, which proved to be the choristers waiting; sitting on an altar-tomb to pass the time, and letting their heels dangle against it. The musicians being now in sight, the youthful party scampered off and rattled up the old wooden stairs of the gallery like a regiment of cavalry; the other boys of the parish waiting outside and observing birds, cats, and other creatures till the vicar entered, when they suddenly subsided into sober church-goers, and passed down the aisle with echoing heels.

The gallery of Mellstock Church had a status and sentiment of its own. A stranger there was regarded with a feeling altogether differing from that of the congregation below towards him. Banished from the nave as an intruder whom no originality could make interesting, he was received above as a curiosity that no unfitness could render dull. The gallery, too, looked down upon and knew the habits of the nave to its remotest peculiarity, and had an extensive stock of exclusive information about it; whilst the nave knew nothing of the gallery folk, as gallery folk, beyond their loud-sounding minims and chest notes. Such topics as that the clerk was always chewing tobacco except at the moment of crying amen; that he had a dust-hole in his pew; that during the sermon certain young daughters of the village had left off caring to read anything so mild as the marriage service for some years, and now regularly studied the one which chronologically follows it; that a pair of lovers touched fingers through a knot-hole between their pews in the manner ordained by their great exemplars, Pyramus and Thisbe; that Mrs. Ledlow, the farmer's wife, counted her money and reckoned her week's marketing expenses during the first lesson — all news to those below — were stale subjects here.

Old William sat in the centre of the front row, his violoncello between his knees and two singers on each hand. Behind him, on the left, came the treble singers and Dick; and on the right the tranter and the tenors. Farther back was old Mail with the altos and supernumeraries.

But before they had taken their places, and whilst they were standing in a circle at the back of the gallery practising a psalm or two, Dick cast his eyes over his grandfather's shoulder, and saw the vision of the past night enter the porch-door as methodically as if she had never been a vision at all. A new atmosphere seemed suddenly to be puffed into the ancient edifice by her movement, which made Dick's body and soul tingle with novel sensations. Directed by Shiner, the churchwarden, she proceeded to the small aisle on the north side of the chancel, a spot now allotted to a throng of

Sunday-school girls, and distinctly visible from the gallery-front by looking under the curve of the furthest arch on that side.

Before this moment the church had seemed comparatively empty — now it was thronged; and as Miss Fancy rose from her knees and looked around her for a permanent place in which to deposit herself — finally choosing the remotest corner — Dick began to breathe more freely the warm new air she had brought with her; to feel rushings of blood, and to have impressions that there was a tie between her and himself visible to all the congregation.

Ever afterwards the young man could recollect individually each part of the service of that bright Christmas morning, and the trifling occurrences which took place as its minutes slowly drew along; the duties of that day dividing themselves by a complete line from the services of other times. The tunes they that morning essayed remained with him for years, apart from all others; also the text; also the appearance of the layer of dust upon the capitals of the piers; that the holly-bough in the chancel archway was hung a little out of the centre — all the ideas, in short, that creep into the mind when reason is only exercising its lowest activity through the eye.

By chance or by fate, another young man who attended Mellstock Church on that Christmas morning had towards the end of the service the same instinctive perception of an interesting presence, in the shape of the same bright maiden, though his emotion reached a far less developed stage. And there was this difference, too, that the person in question was surprised at his condition, and sedulously endeavoured to reduce himself to his normal state of mind. He was the young vicar, Mr. Maybold.

The music on Christmas mornings was frequently below the standard of church-performances at other times. The boys were sleepy from the heavy exertions of the night; the men were slightly wearied; and now, in addition to these constant reasons, there was a dampness in the atmosphere that still further aggravated the evil. Their strings, from the recent long exposure to the night air, rose whole semitones, and snapped with a loud twang at the most silent moment; which necessitated more retiring than ever to the back of the gallery, and made the gallery throats quite husky with the quantity of coughing and hemming required for tuning in. The vicar looked cross.

When the singing was in progress there was suddenly discovered to be a strong and shrill reinforcement from some point, ultimately found to be the school-girls' aisle. At every attempt it grew bolder and more distinct. At the third time of singing, these intrusive feminine voices were as mighty as those of the regular singers; in fact, the flood of sound from this quarter assumed such an individuality, that it had a time, a key, almost a tune of its own, surging upwards when the gallery plunged downwards, and the reverse.

Now this had never happened before within the memory of man. The girls, like the rest of the congregation, had always been humble and respectful followers of the gallery; singing at sixes and sevens if without gallery leaders; never interfering with the ordinances of these practised artists — having no will, union, power, or proclivity except it was given them from the established choir enthroned above them.

A good deal of desperation became noticeable in the gallery throats and strings, which continued throughout the musical portion of the service. Directly the fiddles were laid down, Mr. Penny's spectacles put in their sheath, and the text had been given out, an indignant whispering began.

"Did ye hear that, souls?" Mr. Penny said, in a groaning breath.

"Brazen-faced hussies!" said Bowman.

"True; why, they were every note as loud as we, fiddles and all, if not louder!"

"Fiddles and all!" echoed Bowman bitterly.

"Shall anything saucier be found than united 'ooman?" Mr. Spinks murmured.

"What I want to know is," said the tranter (as if he knew already, but that civilization required the form of words), "what business people have to tell maidens to sing like that when they don't sit in a gallery, and never have entered one in their lives? That's the question, my sonnies."

"'Tis the gallery have got to sing, all the world knows," said Mr. Penny. "Why, souls, what's the use o' the ancients spending scores of pounds to build galleries if people down in the lowest depths of the church sing like that at a moment's notice?"

"Really, I think we useless ones had better march out of church, fiddles and all!" said Mr. Spinks, with a laugh which, to a stranger, would have sounded mild and real. Only the initiated body of men he addressed could understand the horrible bitterness of irony that lurked under the quiet words 'useless ones,' and the ghastliness of the laughter apparently so natural.

"Never mind! Let 'em sing too — 'twill make it all the louder — hee, hee!" said Leaf.

"Thomas Leaf, Thomas Leaf! Where have you lived all your life?" said grandfather William sternly.

The quailing Leaf tried to look as if he had lived nowhere at all.

"When all's said and done, my sonnies," Reuben said, "there'd have been no real harm in their singing if they had let nobody hear 'em, and only jined in now and then."

"None at all," said Mr. Penny. "But though I don't wish to accuse people wrongfully, I'd say before my lord judge that I could hear every note o' that last psalm come from 'em as much as from us — every note as if 'twas their own."

"Know it! ah, I should think I did know it!" Mr. Spinks was heard to observe at this moment, without reference to his fellow players — shaking his head at some idea he seemed to see floating before him, and smiling as if he were attending a funeral at the time. "Ah, do I or don't I know it!"

No one said "Know what?" because all were aware from experience that what he knew would declare itself in process of time.

"I could fancy last night that we should have some trouble wi' that young man," said the tranter, pending the continuance of Spinks's speech, and looking towards the unconscious Mr. Maybold in the pulpit.

"I fancy," said old William, rather severely, "I fancy there's too much whispering going on to be of any spiritual use to gentle or simple." Then folding his lips and concentrating his glance on the vicar, he implied that none but the ignorant would

speak again; and accordingly there was silence in the gallery, Mr. Spinks's telling speech remaining for ever unspoken.

Dick had said nothing, and the tranter little, on this episode of the morning; for Mrs. Dewy at breakfast expressed it as her intention to invite the youthful leader of the culprits to the small party it was customary with them to have on Christmas night — a piece of knowledge which had given a particular brightness to Dick's reflections since he had received it. And in the tranter's slightly-cynical nature, party feeling was weaker than in the other members of the choir, though friendliness and faithful partnership still sustained in him a hearty earnestness on their account.

CHAPTER VII:

THE TRANTER'S PARTY

During the afternoon unusual activity was seen to prevail about the precincts of tranter Dewy's house. The flagstone floor was swept of dust, and a sprinkling of the finest yellow sand from the innermost stratum of the adjoining sand-pit lightly scattered thereupon. Then were produced large knives and forks, which had been shrouded in darkness and grease since the last occasion of the kind, and bearing upon their sides, "Shear-steel, warranted," in such emphatic letters of assurance, that the warranter's name was not required as further proof, and not given. The key was left in the tap of the cider-barrel, instead of being carried in a pocket. And finally the tranter had to stand up in the room and let his wife wheel him round like a turnstile, to see if anything discreditable was visible in his appearance.

"Stand still till I've been for the scissors," said Mrs. Dewy.

The tranter stood as still as a sentinel at the challenge.

The only repairs necessary were a trimming of one or two whiskers that had extended beyond the general contour of the mass; a like trimming of a slightly-frayed edge visible on his shirt-collar; and a final tug at a grey hair — to all of which operations he submitted in resigned silence, except the last, which produced a mild "Come, come, Ann," by way of expostulation.

"Really, Reuben, 'tis quite a disgrace to see such a man," said Mrs. Dewy, with the severity justifiable in a long-tried companion, giving him another turn round, and picking several of Smiler's hairs from the shoulder of his coat. Reuben's thoughts seemed engaged elsewhere, and he yawned. "And the collar of your coat is a shame to behold — so plastered with dirt, or dust, or grease, or something. Why, wherever could you have got it?"

"'Tis my warm nater in summer-time, I suppose. I always did get in such a heat when I bustle about."

"Ay, the Dewys always were such a coarse-skinned family. There's your brother Bob just as bad — as fat as a porpoise — wi' his low, mean, 'How'st do, Ann?' whenever

he meets me. I'd 'How'st do' him indeed! If the sun only shines out a minute, there be you all streaming in the face — I never see!"

"If I be hot week-days, I must be hot Sundays."

"If any of the girls should turn after their father 'twill be a bad look-out for 'em, poor things! None of my family were sich vulgar sweaters, not one of 'em. But, Lord-a-mercy, the Dewys! I don't know how ever I cam' into such a family!"

"Your woman's weakness when I asked ye to jine us. That's how it was I suppose." But the tranter appeared to have heard some such words from his wife before, and hence his answer had not the energy it might have shown if the inquiry had possessed the charm of novelty.

"You never did look so well in a pair o' trousers as in them," she continued in the same unimpassioned voice, so that the unfriendly criticism of the Dewy family seemed to have been more normal than spontaneous. "Such a cheap pair as 'twas too. As big as any man could wish to have, and lined inside, and double-lined in the lower parts, and an extra piece of stiffening at the bottom. And 'tis a nice high cut that comes up right under your armpits, and there's enough turned down inside the seams to make half a pair more, besides a piece of cloth left that will make an honest waistcoat — all by my contriving in buying the stuff at a bargain, and having it made up under my eye. It only shows what may be done by taking a little trouble, and not going straight to the rascally tailors."

The discourse was cut short by the sudden appearance of Charley on the scene, with a face and hands of hideous blackness, and a nose like a guttering candle. Why, on that particularly cleanly afternoon, he should have discovered that the chimney-crook and chain from which the hams were suspended should have possessed more merits and general interest as playthings than any other articles in the house, is a question for nursing mothers to decide. However, the humour seemed to lie in the result being, as has been seen, that any given player with these articles was in the long-run daubed with soot. The last that was seen of Charley by daylight after this piece of ingenuity was when in the act of vanishing from his father's presence round the corner of the house — looking back over his shoulder with an expression of great sin on his face, like Cain as the Outcast in Bible pictures.

* * * * *

The guests had all assembled, and the tranter's party had reached that degree of development which accords with ten o'clock P.M. in rural assemblies. At that hour the sound of a fiddle in process of tuning was heard from the inner pantry.

"That's Dick," said the tranter. "That lad's crazy for a jig."

"Dick! Now I cannot — really, I cannot have any dancing at all till Christmas-day is out," said old William emphatically. "When the clock ha' done striking twelve, dance as much as ye like."

"Well, I must say there's reason in that, William," said Mrs. Penny. "If you do have a party on Christmas-night, 'tis only fair and honourable to the sky-folk to have it

a sit-still party. Jigging parties be all very well on the Devil's holidays; but a jigging party looks suspicious now. O yes; stop till the clock strikes, young folk — so say I."

It happened that some warm mead accidentally got into Mr. Spinks's head about this time.

"Dancing," he said, "is a most strengthening, livening, and courting movement, 'specially with a little beverage added! And dancing is good. But why disturb what is ordained, Richard and Reuben, and the company zhineraly? Why, I ask, as far as that do go?"

"Then nothing till after twelve," said William.

Though Reuben and his wife ruled on social points, religious questions were mostly disposed of by the old man, whose firmness on this head quite counterbalanced a certain weakness in his handling of domestic matters. The hopes of the younger members of the household were therefore relegated to a distance of one hour and three-quarters — a result that took visible shape in them by a remote and listless look about the eyes — the singing of songs being permitted in the interim.

At five minutes to twelve the soft tuning was again heard in the back quarters; and when at length the clock had whizzed forth the last stroke, Dick appeared ready primed, and the instruments were boldly handled; old William very readily taking the bass-viol from its accustomed nail, and touching the strings as irreligiously as could be desired.

The country-dance called the 'Triumph, or Follow my Lover,' was the figure with which they opened. The tranter took for his partner Mrs. Penny, and Mrs. Dewy was chosen by Mr. Penny, who made so much of his limited height by a judicious carriage of the head, straightening of the back, and important flashes of his spectacle-glasses, that he seemed almost as tall as the tranter. Mr. Shiner, age about thirty-five, farmer and church-warden, a character principally composed of a crimson stare, vigorous breath, and a watch-chain, with a mouth hanging on a dark smile but never smiling, had come quite willingly to the party, and showed a wondrous obliviousness of all his antics on the previous night. But the comely, slender, prettily-dressed prize Fancy Day fell to Dick's lot, in spite of some private machinations of the farmer, for the reason that Mr. Shiner, as a richer man, had shown too much assurance in asking the favour, whilst Dick had been duly courteous.

We gain a good view of our heroine as she advances to her place in the ladies' line. She belonged to the taller division of middle height. Flexibility was her first characteristic, by which she appeared to enjoy the most easeful rest when she was in gliding motion. Her dark eyes — arched by brows of so keen, slender, and soft a curve, that they resembled nothing so much as two slurs in music — showed primarily a bright sparkle each. This was softened by a frequent thoughtfulness, yet not so frequent as to do away, for more than a few minutes at a time, with a certain coquettishness; which in its turn was never so decided as to banish honesty. Her lips imitated her brows in their clearly-cut outline and softness of bend; and her nose was well shaped — which is saying a great deal, when it is remembered that there are a hundred pretty

mouths and eyes for one pretty nose. Add to this, plentiful knots of dark-brown hair, a gauzy dress of white, with blue facings; and the slightest idea may be gained of the young maiden who showed, amidst the rest of the dancing-ladies, like a flower among vegetables. And so the dance proceeded. Mr. Shiner, according to the interesting rule laid down, deserted his own partner, and made off down the middle with this fair one of Dick's — the pair appearing from the top of the room like two persons tripping down a lane to be married. Dick trotted behind with what was intended to be a look of composure, but which was, in fact, a rather silly expression of feature — implying, with too much earnestness, that such an elopement could not be tolerated. Then they turned and came back, when Dick grew more rigid around his mouth, and blushed with ingenuous ardour as he joined hands with the rival and formed the arch over his lady's head; which presumably gave the figure its name; relinquishing her again at setting to partners, when Mr. Shiner's new chain quivered in every link, and all the loose flesh upon the tranter — who here came into action again — shook like jelly. Mrs. Penny, being always rather concerned for her personal safety when she danced with the tranter, fixed her face to a chronic smile of timidity the whole time it lasted — a peculiarity which filled her features with wrinkles, and reduced her eyes to little straight lines like hyphens, as she jiggled up and down opposite him; repeating in her own person not only his proper movements, but also the minor flourishes which the richness of the tranter's imagination led him to introduce from time to time — an imitation which had about it something of slavish obedience, not unmixed with fear.

The ear-rings of the ladies now flung themselves wildly about, turning violent summersaults, banging this way and that, and then swinging quietly against the ears sustaining them. Mrs. Crumpler — a heavy woman, who, for some reason which nobody ever thought worth inquiry, danced in a clean apron — moved so smoothly through the figure that her feet were never seen; conveying to imaginative minds the idea that she rolled on castors.

Minute after minute glided by, and the party reached the period when ladies' back-hair begins to look forgotten and dissipated; when a perceptible dampness makes itself apparent upon the faces even of delicate girls — a ghastly dew having for some time rained from the features of their masculine partners; when skirts begin to be torn out of their gathers; when elderly people, who have stood up to please their juniors, begin to feel sundry small tremblings in the region of the knees, and to wish the interminable dance was at Jericho; when (at country parties of the thorough sort) waistcoats begin to be unbuttoned, and when the fiddlers' chairs have been wriggled, by the frantic bowing of their occupiers, to a distance of about two feet from where they originally stood.

Fancy was dancing with Mr. Shiner. Dick knew that Fancy, by the law of good manners, was bound to dance as pleasantly with one partner as with another; yet he could not help suggesting to himself that she need not have put quite so much spirit into her steps, nor smiled quite so frequently whilst in the farmer's hands.

"I'm afraid you didn't cast off," said Dick mildly to Mr. Shiner, before the latter man's watch-chain had done vibrating from a recent whirl.

Fancy made a motion of accepting the correction; but her partner took no notice, and proceeded with the next movement, with an affectionate bend towards her.

"That Shiner's too fond of her," the young man said to himself as he watched them. They came to the top again, Fancy smiling warmly towards her partner, and went to their places.

"Mr. Shiner, you didn't cast off," said Dick, for want of something else to demolish him with; casting off himself, and being put out at the farmer's irregularity.

"Perhaps I sha'n't cast off for any man," said Mr. Shiner.

"I think you ought to, sir."

Dick's partner, a young lady of the name of Lizzy — called Lizz for short — tried to mollify.

"I can't say that I myself have much feeling for casting off," she said.

"Nor I," said Mrs. Penny, following up the argument, "especially if a friend and neighbour is set against it. Not but that 'tis a terrible tasty thing in good hands and well done; yes, indeed, so say I."

"All I meant was," said Dick, rather sorry that he had spoken correctingly to a guest, "that 'tis in the dance; and a man has hardly any right to hack and mangle what was ordained by the regular dance-maker, who, I daresay, got his living by making 'em, and thought of nothing else all his life."

"I don't like casting off: then very well; I cast off for no dance-maker that ever lived."

Dick now appeared to be doing mental arithmetic, the act being really an effort to present to himself, in an abstract form, how far an argument with a formidable rival ought to be carried, when that rival was his mother's guest. The dead-lock was put an end to by the stamping arrival up the middle of the tranter, who, despising minutiae on principle, started a theme of his own.

"I assure you, neighbours," he said, "the heat of my frame no tongue can tell!" He looked around and endeavoured to give, by a forcible gaze of self-sympathy, some faint idea of the truth.

Mrs. Dewy formed one of the next couple.

"Yes," she said, in an auxiliary tone, "Reuben always was such a hot man."

Mrs. Penny implied the species of sympathy that such a class of affliction required, by trying to smile and to look grieved at the same time.

"If he only walk round the garden of a Sunday morning, his shirt-collar is as limp as no starch at all," continued Mrs. Dewy, her countenance lapsing parenthetically into a housewifely expression of concern at the reminiscence.

"Come, come, you women-folk; 'tis hands across — come, come!" said the tranter; and the conversation ceased for the present.

CHAPTER VIII:

THEY DANCE MORE WILDLY

Dick had at length secured Fancy for that most delightful of country-dances, opening with six-hands-round.

“Before we begin,” said the tranter, “my proposal is, that ‘twould be a right and proper plan for every mortal man in the dance to pull off his jacket, considering the heat.”

“Such low notions as you have, Reuben! Nothing but strip will go down with you when you are a-dancing. Such a hot man as he is!”

“Well, now, look here, my sonnies,” he argued to his wife, whom he often addressed in the plural masculine for economy of epithet merely; “I don’t see that. You dance and get hot as fire; therefore you lighten your clothes. Isn’t that nature and reason for gentle and simple? If I strip by myself and not necessary, ‘tis rather pot-housey I own; but if we stout chaps strip one and all, why, ‘tis the native manners of the country, which no man can gainsay? Hey — what did you say, my sonnies?”

“Strip we will!” said the three other heavy men who were in the dance; and their coats were accordingly taken off and hung in the passage, whence the four sufferers from heat soon reappeared, marching in close column, with flapping shirt-sleeves, and having, as common to them all, a general glance of being now a match for any man or dancer in England or Ireland. Dick, fearing to lose ground in Fancy’s good opinion, retained his coat like the rest of the thinner men; and Mr. Shiner did the same from superior knowledge.

And now a further phase of revelry had disclosed itself. It was the time of night when a guest may write his name in the dust upon the tables and chairs, and a bluish mist pervades the atmosphere, becoming a distinct halo round the candles; when people’s nostrils, wrinkles, and crevices in general, seem to be getting gradually plastered up; when the very fiddlers as well as the dancers get red in the face, the dancers having advanced further still towards incandescence, and entered the cadaverous phase; the fiddlers no longer sit down, but kick back their chairs and saw madly at the strings, with legs firmly spread and eyes closed, regardless of the visible world. Again and again did Dick share his Love’s hand with another man, and wheel round; then, more delightfully, promenaded in a circle with her all to himself, his arm holding her waist more firmly each time, and his elbow getting further and further behind her back, till the distance reached was rather noticeable; and, most blissful, swinging to places shoulder to shoulder, her breath curling round his neck like a summer zephyr that had strayed from its proper date. Threading the couples one by one they reached the bottom, when there arose in Dick’s mind a minor misery lest the tune should end before they could work their way to the top again, and have anew the same exciting run down through. Dick’s feelings on actually reaching the top in spite of his doubts were supplemented by a mortal fear that the fiddling might even stop at this supreme moment; which prompted him to convey a stealthy whisper to the far-gone musicians,

to the effect that they were not to leave off till he and his partner had reached the bottom of the dance once more, which remark was replied to by the nearest of those convulsed and quivering men by a private nod to the anxious young man between two semiquavers of the tune, and a simultaneous "All right, ay, ay," without opening the eyes. Fancy was now held so closely that Dick and she were practically one person. The room became to Dick like a picture in a dream; all that he could remember of it afterwards being the look of the fiddlers going to sleep, as humming-tops sleep, by increasing their motion and hum, together with the figures of grandfather James and old Simon Crumpler sitting by the chimney-corner, talking and nodding in dumb-show, and beating the air to their emphatic sentences like people near a threshing machine.

The dance ended. "Piph-h-h-h!" said tranter Dewy, blowing out his breath in the very finest stream of vapour that a man's lips could form. "A regular tightener, that one, sonnies!" He wiped his forehead, and went to the cider and ale mugs on the table.

"Well!" said Mrs. Penny, flopping into a chair, "my heart haven't been in such a thumping state of uproar since I used to sit up on old Midsummer-eves to see who my husband was going to be."

"And that's getting on for a good few years ago now, from what I've heard you tell," said the tranter, without lifting his eyes from the cup he was filling. Being now engaged in the business of handing round refreshments, he was warranted in keeping his coat off still, though the other heavy men had resumed theirs.

"And a thing I never expected would come to pass, if you'll believe me, came to pass then," continued Mrs. Penny. "Ah, the first spirit ever I see on a Midsummer-eve was a puzzle to me when he appeared, a hard puzzle, so say I!"

"So I should have fancied," said Elias Spinks.

"Yes," said Mrs. Penny, throwing her glance into past times, and talking on in a running tone of complacent abstraction, as if a listener were not a necessity. "Yes; never was I in such a taking as on that Midsummer-eve! I sat up, quite determined to see if John Wildway was going to marry me or no. I put the bread-and-cheese and beer quite ready, as the witch's book ordered, and I opened the door, and I waited till the clock struck twelve, my nerves all alive and so strained that I could feel every one of 'em twitching like bell-wires. Yes, sure! and when the clock had struck, lo and behold, I could see through the door a little small man in the lane wi' a shoemaker's apron on."

Here Mr. Penny stealthily enlarged himself half an inch.

"Now, John Wildway," Mrs. Penny continued, "who courted me at that time, was a shoemaker, you see, but he was a very fair-sized man, and I couldn't believe that any such a little small man had anything to do wi' me, as anybody might. But on he came, and crossed the threshold — not John, but actually the same little small man in the shoemaker's apron — "

"You needn't be so mighty particular about little and small!" said her husband.

"In he walks, and down he sits, and O my goodness me, didn't I flee upstairs, body and soul hardly hanging together! Well, to cut a long story short, by-long and by-late,

John Wildway and I had a miff and parted; and lo and behold, the coming man came! Penny asked me if I'd go snacks with him, and afore I knew what I was about a'most, the thing was done."

"I've fancied you never knew better in your life; but I mid be mistaken," said Mr. Penny in a murmur.

After Mrs. Penny had spoken, there being no new occupation for her eyes, she still let them stay idling on the past scenes just related, which were apparently visible to her in the centre of the room. Mr. Penny's remark received no reply.

During this discourse the tranter and his wife might have been observed standing in an unobtrusive corner, in mysterious closeness to each other, a just perceptible current of intelligence passing from each to each, which had apparently no relation whatever to the conversation of their guests, but much to their sustenance. A conclusion of some kind having at length been drawn, the palpable confederacy of man and wife was once more obliterated, the tranter marching off into the pantry, humming a tune that he couldn't quite recollect, and then breaking into the words of a song of which he could remember about one line and a quarter. Mrs. Dewy spoke a few words about preparations for a bit of supper.

That elder portion of the company which loved eating and drinking put on a look to signify that till this moment they had quite forgotten that it was customary to expect suppers on these occasions; going even further than this politeness of feature, and starting irrelevant subjects, the exceeding flatness and forced tone of which rather betrayed their object. The younger members said they were quite hungry, and that supper would be delightful though it was so late.

Good luck attended Dick's love-passes during the meal. He sat next Fancy, and had the thrilling pleasure of using permanently a glass which had been taken by Fancy in mistake; of letting the outer edge of the sole of his boot touch the lower verge of her skirt; and to add to these delights the cat, which had lain unobserved in her lap for several minutes, crept across into his own, touching him with fur that had touched her hand a moment before. There were, besides, some little pleasures in the shape of helping her to vegetable she didn't want, and when it had nearly alighted on her plate taking it across for his own use, on the plea of waste not, want not. He also, from time to time, sipped sweet sly glances at her profile; noticing the set of her head, the curve of her throat, and other artistic properties of the lively goddess, who the while kept up a rather free, not to say too free, conversation with Mr. Shiner sitting opposite; which, after some uneasy criticism, and much shifting of argument backwards and forwards in Dick's mind, he decided not to consider of alarming significance.

"A new music greets our ears now," said Miss Fancy, alluding, with the sharpness that her position as village sharpener demanded, to the contrast between the rattle of knives and forks and the late notes of the fiddlers.

"Ay; and I don't know but what 'tis sweeter in tone when you get above forty," said the tranter; "except, in faith, as regards father there. Never such a mortal man as he for tunes. They do move his soul; don't 'em, father?"

The eldest Dewy smiled across from his distant chair an assent to Reuben's remark.

"Spaking of being moved in soul," said Mr. Penny, "I shall never forget the first time I heard the 'Dead March.' 'Twas at poor Corp'l Nineman's funeral at Casterbridge. It fairly made my hair creep and fidget about like a vlock of sheep — ah, it did, souls! And when they had done, and the last trump had sounded, and the guns was fired over the dead hero's grave, a' icy-cold drop o' moist sweat hung upon my forehead, and another upon my jawbone. Ah, 'tis a very solemn thing!"

"Well, as to father in the corner there," the tranter said, pointing to old William, who was in the act of filling his mouth; "he'd starve to death for music's sake now, as much as when he was a boy-chap of fifteen."

"Truly, now," said Michael Mail, clearing the corner of his throat in the manner of a man who meant to be convincing; "there's a friendly tie of some sort between music and eating." He lifted the cup to his mouth, and drank himself gradually backwards from a perpendicular position to a slanting one, during which time his looks performed a circuit from the wall opposite him to the ceiling overhead. Then clearing the other corner of his throat: "Once I was a-setting in the little kitchen of the Dree Mariners at Casterbridge, having a bit of dinner, and a brass band struck up in the street. Such a beautiful band as that were! I was setting eating fried liver and lights, I well can mind — ah, I was! and to save my life, I couldn't help chawing to the tune. Band played six-eight time; six-eight chaws I, willynilly. Band plays common; common time went my teeth among the liver and lights as true as a hair. Beautiful 'twere! Ah, I shall never forget that there band!"

"That's as tuneful a thing as ever I heard of," said grandfather James, with the absent gaze which accompanies profound criticism.

"I don't like Michael's tuneful stories then," said Mrs. Dewy. "They are quite coarse to a person o' decent taste."

Old Michael's mouth twitched here and there, as if he wanted to smile but didn't know where to begin, which gradually settled to an expression that it was not displeasing for a nice woman like the tranter's wife to correct him.

"Well, now," said Reuben, with decisive earnestness, "that sort o' coarse touch that's so upsetting to Ann's feelings is to my mind a recommendation; for it do always prove a story to be true. And for the same reason, I like a story with a bad moral. My sonnies, all true stories have a coarse touch or a bad moral, depend upon't. If the story-tellers could ha' got decency and good morals from true stories, who'd ha' troubled to invent parables?" Saying this the tranter arose to fetch a new stock of cider, ale, mead, and home-made wines.

Mrs. Dewy sighed, and appended a remark (ostensibly behind her husband's back, though that the words should reach his ears distinctly was understood by both): "Such a man as Dewy is! Nobody do know the trouble I have to keep that man barely respectable. And did you ever hear too — just now at supper-time — talking about 'taties' with Michael in such a work-folk way. Well, 'tis what I was never brought up to! With our family 'twas never less than 'taters,' and very often 'pertatoes' outright;

mother was so particular and nice with us girls there was no family in the parish that kept them selves up more than we.”

The hour of parting came. Fancy could not remain for the night, because she had engaged a woman to wait up for her. She disappeared temporarily from the flagging party of dancers, and then came downstairs wrapped up and looking altogether a different person from whom she had been hitherto, in fact (to Dick’s sadness and disappointment), a woman somewhat reserved and of a phlegmatic temperament — nothing left in her of the romping girl that she had seemed but a short quarter-hour before, who had not minded the weight of Dick’s hand upon her waist, nor shirked the purlieus of the mistletoe.

“What a difference!” thought the young man — hoary cynic pro tem. “What a miserable deceiving difference between the manners of a maid’s life at dancing times and at others! Look at this lovely Fancy! Through the whole past evening touchable, squeezeable — even kissable! For whole half-hours I held her so close to me that not a sheet of paper could have been shipped between us; and I could feel her heart only just outside my own, her life beating on so close to mine, that I was aware of every breath in it. A flit is made upstairs — a hat and a cloak put on — and I no more dare to touch her than — ” Thought failed him, and he returned to realities.

But this was an endurable misery in comparison with what followed. Mr. Shiner and his watch-chain, taking the intrusive advantage that ardent bachelors who are going homeward along the same road as a pretty young woman always do take of that circumstance, came forward to assure Fancy — with a total disregard of Dick’s emotions, and in tones which were certainly not frigid — that he (Shiner) was not the man to go to bed before seeing his Lady Fair safe within her own door — not he, nobody should say he was that; — and that he would not leave her side an inch till the thing was done — drown him if he would. The proposal was assented to by Miss Day, in Dick’s foreboding judgment, with one degree — or at any rate, an appreciable fraction of a degree — of warmth beyond that required by a disinterested desire for protection from the dangers of the night.

All was over; and Dick surveyed the chair she had last occupied, looking now like a setting from which the gem has been torn. There stood her glass, and the romantic teaspoonful of elder wine at the bottom that she couldn’t drink by trying ever so hard, in obedience to the mighty arguments of the tranter (his hand coming down upon her shoulder the while, like a Nasmyth hammer); but the drinker was there no longer. There were the nine or ten pretty little crumbs she had left on her plate; but the eater was no more seen.

There seemed a disagreeable closeness of relationship between himself and the members of his family, now that they were left alone again face to face. His father seemed quite offensive for appearing to be in just as high spirits as when the guests were there; and as for grandfather James (who had not yet left), he was quite fiendish in being rather glad they were gone.

“Really,” said the tranter, in a tone of placid satisfaction, “I’ve had so little time to attend to myself all the evenen, that I mean to enjoy a quiet meal now! A slice of this here ham — neither too fat nor too lean — so; and then a drop of this vinegar and pickles — there, that’s it — and I shall be as fresh as a lark again! And to tell the truth, my sonny, my inside has been as dry as a lime-basket all night.”

“I like a party very well once in a while,” said Mrs. Dewy, leaving off the adorned tones she had been bound to use throughout the evening, and returning to the natural marriage voice; “but, Lord, ‘tis such a sight of heavy work next day! What with the dirty plates, and knives and forks, and dust and smother, and bits kicked off your furniture, and I don’t know what all, why a body could a’most wish there were no such things as Christmases . . . Ah-h dear!” she yawned, till the clock in the corner had ticked several beats. She cast her eyes round upon the displaced, dust-laden furniture, and sank down overpowered at the sight.

“Well, I be getting all right by degrees, thank the Lord for’t!” said the tranter cheerfully through a mangled mass of ham and bread, without lifting his eyes from his plate, and chopping away with his knife and fork as if he were felling trees. “Ann, you may as well go on to bed at once, and not bide there making such sleepy faces; you look as long-favoured as a fiddle, upon my life, Ann. There, you must be wearied out, ‘tis true. I’ll do the doors and draw up the clock; and you go on, or you’ll be as white as a sheet to-morrow.”

“Ay; I don’t know whether I shan’t or no.” The matron passed her hand across her eyes to brush away the film of sleep till she got upstairs.

Dick wondered how it was that when people were married they could be so blind to romance; and was quite certain that if he ever took to wife that dear impossible Fancy, he and she would never be so dreadfully practical and undemonstrative of the Passion as his father and mother were. The most extraordinary thing was, that all the fathers and mothers he knew were just as undemonstrative as his own.

CHAPTER IX:

DICK CALLS AT THE SCHOOL

The early days of the year drew on, and Fancy, having spent the holiday weeks at home, returned again to Mellstock.

Every spare minute of the week following her return was used by Dick in accidentally passing the schoolhouse in his journeys about the neighbourhood; but not once did she make herself visible. A handkerchief belonging to her had been providentially found by his mother in clearing the rooms the day after that of the dance; and by much contrivance Dick got it handed over to him, to leave with her at any time he should be near the school after her return. But he delayed taking the extreme measure of calling with it lest, had she really no sentiment of interest in him, it might be regarded as a slightly absurd errand, the reason guessed; and the sense of the ludicrous, which was

rather keen in her, do his dignity considerable injury in her eyes; and what she thought of him, even apart from the question of her loving, was all the world to him now.

But the hour came when the patience of love at twenty-one could endure no longer. One Saturday he approached the school with a mild air of indifference, and had the satisfaction of seeing the object of his quest at the further end of her garden, trying, by the aid of a spade and gloves, to root a bramble that had intruded itself there.

He disguised his feelings from some suspicious-looking cottage-windows opposite by endeavouring to appear like a man in a great hurry of business, who wished to leave the handkerchief and have done with such trifling errands.

This endeavour signally failed; for on approaching the gate he found it locked to keep the children, who were playing 'cross-dadder' in the front, from running into her private grounds.

She did not see him; and he could only think of one thing to be done, which was to shout her name.

"Miss Day!"

The words were uttered with a jerk and a look meant to imply to the cottages opposite that he was now simply one who liked shouting as a pleasant way of passing his time, without any reference to persons in gardens. The name died away, and the unconscious Miss Day continued digging and pulling as before.

He screwed himself up to enduring the cottage-windows yet more stoically, and shouted again. Fancy took no notice whatever.

He shouted the third time, with desperate vehemence, turning suddenly about and retiring a little distance, as if it were by no means for his own pleasure that he had come.

This time she heard him, came down the garden, and entered the school at the back. Footsteps echoed across the interior, the door opened, and three-quarters of the blooming young schoolmistress's face and figure stood revealed before him; a slice on her left-hand side being cut off by the edge of the door. Having surveyed and recognized him, she came to the gate.

At sight of him had the pink of her cheeks increased, lessened, or did it continue to cover its normal area of ground? It was a question meditated several hundreds of times by her visitor in after-hours — the meditation, after wearying involutions, always ending in one way, that it was impossible to say.

"Your handkerchief: Miss Day: I called with." He held it out spasmodically and awkwardly. "Mother found it: under a chair."

"O, thank you very much for bringing it, Mr. Dewy. I couldn't think where I had dropped it."

Now Dick, not being an experienced lover — indeed, never before having been engaged in the practice of love-making at all, except in a small schoolboy way — could not take advantage of the situation; and out came the blunder, which afterwards cost him so many bitter moments and a sleepless night:-

"Good morning, Miss Day."

“Good morning, Mr. Dewy.”

The gate was closed; she was gone; and Dick was standing outside, unchanged in his condition from what he had been before he called. Of course the Angel was not to blame — a young woman living alone in a house could not ask him indoors unless she had known him better — he should have kept her outside before floundering into that fatal farewell. He wished that before he called he had realised more fully than he did the pleasure of being about to call; and turned away.

PART THE SECOND — SPRING

CHAPTER I:

PASSING BY THE SCHOOL

It followed that, as the spring advanced, Dick walked abroad much more frequently than had hitherto been usual with him, and was continually finding that his nearest way to or from home lay by the road which skirted the garden of the school. The first-fruits of his perseverance were that, on turning the angle on the nineteenth journey by that track, he saw Miss Fancy’s figure, clothed in a dark-gray dress, looking from a high open window upon the crown of his hat. The friendly greeting resulting from this rencounter was considered so valuable an elixir that Dick passed still oftener; and by the time he had almost trodden a little path under the fence where never a path was before, he was rewarded with an actual meeting face to face on the open road before her gate. This brought another meeting, and another, Fancy faintly showing by her bearing that it was a pleasure to her of some kind to see him there; but the sort of pleasure she derived, whether exultation at the hope her exceeding fairness inspired, or the true feeling which was alone Dick’s concern, he could not anyhow decide, although he meditated on her every little movement for hours after it was made.

CHAPTER II:

A MEETING OF THE QUIRE

It was the evening of a fine spring day. The descending sun appeared as a nebulous blaze of amber light, its outline being lost in cloudy masses hanging round it, like wild locks of hair.

The chief members of Mellstock parish choir were standing in a group in front of Mr. Penny’s workshop in the lower village. They were all brightly illuminated, and each was backed up by a shadow as long as a steeple; the lowness of the source of light rendering the brims of their hats of no use at all as a protection to the eyes.

Mr. Penny’s was the last house in that part of the parish, and stood in a hollow by the roadside so that cart-wheels and horses’ legs were about level with the sill of

his shop-window. This was low and wide, and was open from morning till evening, Mr. Penny himself being invariably seen working inside, like a framed portrait of a shoemaker by some modern Moroni. He sat facing the road, with a boot on his knees and the awl in his hand, only looking up for a moment as he stretched out his arms and bent forward at the pull, when his spectacles flashed in the passer's face with a shine of flat whiteness, and then returned again to the boot as usual. Rows of lasts, small and large, stout and slender, covered the wall which formed the background, in the extreme shadow of which a kind of dummy was seen sitting, in the shape of an apprentice with a string tied round his hair (probably to keep it out of his eyes). He smiled at remarks that floated in from without, but was never known to answer them in Mr. Penny's presence. Outside the window the upper-leather of a Wellington-boot was usually hung, pegged to a board as if to dry. No sign was over his door; in fact — as with old banks and mercantile houses — advertising in any shape was scorned, and it would have been felt as beneath his dignity to paint up, for the benefit of strangers, the name of an establishment whose trade came solely by connection based on personal respect.

His visitors now came and stood on the outside of his window, sometimes leaning against the sill, sometimes moving a pace or two backwards and forwards in front of it. They talked with deliberate gesticulations to Mr. Penny, enthroned in the shadow of the interior.

“I do like a man to stick to men who be in the same line o' life — o' Sundays, anyway — that I do so.”

“‘Tis like all the doings of folk who don't know what a day's work is, that's what I say.”

“My belief is the man's not to blame; ‘tis she — she's the bitter weed!”

“No, not altogether. He's a poor gawk-hammer. Look at his sermon yesterday.”

“His sermon was well enough, a very good guessable sermon, only he couldn't put it into words and speak it. That's all was the matter wi' the sermon. He hadn't been able to get it past his pen.”

“Well — ay, the sermon might have been good; for, ‘tis true, the sermon of Old Eccl'iastes himself lay in Eccl'iastes's ink-bottle afore he got it out.”

Mr. Penny, being in the act of drawing the last stitch tight, could afford time to look up and throw in a word at this point.

“He's no spouter — that must be said, ‘a b'lieve.”

“‘Tis a terrible muddle sometimes with the man, as far as spout do go,” said Spinks.

“Well, we'll say nothing about that,” the tranter answered; “for I don't believe ‘twill make a penneth o' difference to we poor martels here or hereafter whether his sermons be good or bad, my sonnies.”

Mr. Penny made another hole with his awl, pushed in the thread, and looked up and spoke again at the extension of arms.

“‘Tis his goings-on, souls, that’s what it is.” He clenched his features for an Herculean addition to the ordinary pull, and continued, “The first thing he done when he came here was to be hot and strong about church business.”

“True,” said Spinks; “that was the very first thing he done.”

Mr. Penny, having now been offered the ear of the assembly, accepted it, ceased stitching, swallowed an unimportant quantity of air as if it were a pill, and continued:

“The next thing he do do is to think about altering the church, until he found ‘twould be a matter o’ cost and what not, and then not to think no more about it.”

“True: that was the next thing he done.”

“And the next thing was to tell the young chaps that they were not on no account to put their hats in the christening font during service.”

“True.”

“And then ‘twas this, and then ‘twas that, and now ‘tis — ”

Words were not forcible enough to conclude the sentence, and Mr. Penny gave a huge pull to signify the concluding word.

“Now ‘tis to turn us out of the quire neck and crop,” said the tranter after an interval of half a minute, not by way of explaining the pause and pull, which had been quite understood, but as a means of keeping the subject well before the meeting.

Mrs. Penny came to the door at this point in the discussion. Like all good wives, however much she was inclined to play the Tory to her husband’s Whiggism, and vice versâ, in times of peace, she coalesced with him heartily enough in time of war.

“It must be owned he’s not all there,” she replied in a general way to the fragments of talk she had heard from indoors. “Far below poor Mr. Grinham” (the late vicar).

“Ay, there was this to be said for he, that you were quite sure he’d never come mumbudgeting to see ye, just as you were in the middle of your work, and put you out with his fuss and trouble about ye.”

“Never. But as for this new Mr. Maybold, though he mid be a very well-intending party in that respect, he’s unbearable; for as to sifting your cinders, scrubbing your floors, or emptying your slops, why, you can’t do it. I assure you I’ve not been able to empt them for several days, unless I throw ‘em up the chimley or out of winder; for as sure as the sun you meet him at the door, coming to ask how you are, and ‘tis such a confusing thing to meet a gentleman at the door when ye are in the mess o’ washing.”

“‘Tis only for want of knowing better, poor gentleman,” said the tranter. “His meaning’s good enough. Ay, your pa’son comes by fate: ‘tis heads or tails, like pitch-halfpenny, and no choosing; so we must take en as he is, my sonnies, and thank God he’s no worse, I suppose.”

“I fancy I’ve seen him look across at Miss Day in a warmer way than Christianity asked for,” said Mrs. Penny musingly; “but I don’t quite like to say it.”

“O no; there’s nothing in that,” said grandfather William.

“If there’s nothing, we shall see nothing,” Mrs. Penny replied, in the tone of a woman who might possibly have private opinions still.

“Ah, Mr. Grinham was the man!” said Bowman. “Why, he never troubled us wi’ a visit from year’s end to year’s end. You might go anywhere, do anything: you’d be sure never to see him.”

“Yes, he was a right sensible pa’son,” said Michael. “He never entered our door but once in his life, and that was to tell my poor wife — ay, poor soul, dead and gone now, as we all shall! — that as she was such a’ old aged person, and lived so far from the church, he didn’t at all expect her to come any more to the service.”

“And ‘a was a very jinerous gentleman about choosing the psalms and hymns o’ Sundays. ‘Confound ye,’ says he, ‘blare and scrape what ye will, but don’t bother me!’”

“And he was a very honourable man in not wanting any of us to come and hear him if we were all on-end for a jaunt or spree, or to bring the babies to be christened if they were inclined to squalling. There’s good in a man’s not putting a parish to unnecessary trouble.”

“And there’s this here man never letting us have a bit o’ peace; but keeping on about being good and upright till ‘tis carried to such a pitch as I never see the like afore nor since!”

“No sooner had he got here than he found the font wouldn’t hold water, as it hadn’t for years off and on; and when I told him that Mr. Grinham never minded it, but used to spet upon his vinger and christen ‘em just as well, ‘a said, ‘Good Heavens! Send for a workman immediate. What place have I come to!’ Which was no compliment to us, come to that.”

“Still, for my part,” said old William, “though he’s arrayed against us, I like the hearty borussnorus ways of the new pa’son.”

“You, ready to die for the quire,” said Bowman reproachfully, “to stick up for the quire’s enemy, William!”

“Nobody will feel the loss of our church-work so much as I,” said the old man firmly; “that you d’all know. I’ve a-been in the quire man and boy ever since I was a chiel of eleven. But for all that ‘t isn’t in me to call the man a bad man, because I truly and sincerely believe en to be a good young feller.”

Some of the youthful sparkle that used to reside there animated William’s eye as he uttered the words, and a certain nobility of aspect was also imparted to him by the setting sun, which gave him a Titanic shadow at least thirty feet in length, stretching away to the east in outlines of imposing magnitude, his head finally terminating upon the trunk of a grand old oak-tree.

“Mayble’s a hearty feller enough,” the tranter replied, “and will spak to you be you dirty or be you clane. The first time I met en was in a drong, and though ‘a didn’t know me no more than the dead, ‘a passed the time of day. ‘D’ye do?’ he said, says he, nodding his head. ‘A fine day.’ Then the second time I met en was full-buff in town street, when my breeches were tore into a long strent by getting through a copse of thorns and brimbles for a short cut home-along; and not wanting to disgrace the man by spaking in that state, I fixed my eye on the weathercock to let en pass me as a

stranger. But no: 'How d'ye do, Reuben?' says he, right hearty, and shook my hand. If I'd been dressed in silver spangles from top to toe, the man couldn't have been civiler."

At this moment Dick was seen coming up the village-street, and they turned and watched him.

CHAPTER III:

A TURN IN THE DISCUSSION

"I'm afraid Dick's a lost man," said the tranter.

"What? — no!" said Mail, implying by his manner that it was a far commoner thing for his ears to report what was not said than that his judgment should be at fault.

"Ay," said the tranter, still gazing at Dick's unconscious advance. "I don't at all like what I see! There's too many o' them looks out of the winder without noticing anything; too much shining of boots; too much peeping round corners; too much looking at the clock; telling about clever things she did till you be sick of it; and then upon a hint to that effect a horrible silence about her. I've walked the path once in my life and know the country, neighbours; and Dick's a lost man!" The tranter turned a quarter round and smiled a smile of miserable satire at the setting new moon, which happened to catch his eye.

The others became far too serious at this announcement to allow them to speak; and they still regarded Dick in the distance.

"'Twas his mother's fault," the tranter continued, "in asking the young woman to our party last Christmas. When I eyed the blue frock and light heels o' the maid, I had my thoughts directly. 'God bless thee, Dicky my sonny,' I said to myself; 'there's a delusion for thee!'"

"They seemed to be rather distant in manner last Sunday, I thought?" Mail tentatively observed, as became one who was not a member of the family.

"Ay, that's a part of the zickness. Distance belongs to it, slyness belongs to it, queerest things on earth belongs to it! There, 't may as well come early as late s'far as I know. The sooner begun, the sooner over; for come it will."

"The question I ask is," said Mr. Spinks, connecting into one thread the two subjects of discourse, as became a man learned in rhetoric, and beating with his hand in a way which signified that the manner rather than the matter of his speech was to be observed, "how did Mr. Maybold know she could play the organ? You know we had it from her own lips, as far as lips go, that she has never, first or last, breathed such a thing to him; much less that she ever would play."

In the midst of this puzzle Dick joined the party, and the news which had caused such a convulsion among the ancient musicians was unfolded to him. "Well," he said, blushing at the allusion to Miss Day, "I know by some words of hers that she has a particular wish not to play, because she is a friend of ours; and how the alteration comes, I don't know."

“Now, this is my plan,” said the tranter, reviving the spirit of the discussion by the infusion of new ideas, as was his custom — ”this is my plan; if you don’t like it, no harm’s done. We all know one another very well, don’t we, neighbours?”

That they knew one another very well was received as a statement which, though familiar, should not be omitted in introductory speeches.

“Then I say this” — and the tranter in his emphasis slapped down his hand on Mr. Spinks’s shoulder with a momentum of several pounds, upon which Mr. Spinks tried to look not in the least startled — ”I say that we all move down-along straight as a line to Pa’son Mayble’s when the clock has gone six to-morrow night. There we one and all stand in the passage, then one or two of us go in and spak to en, man and man; and say, ‘Pa’son Mayble, every tradesman d’like to have his own way in his workshop, and Mellstock Church is yours. Instead of turning us out neck and crop, let us stay on till Christmas, and we’ll gie way to the young woman, Mr. Mayble, and make no more ado about it. And we shall always be quite willing to touch our hats when we meet ye, Mr. Mayble, just as before.’ That sounds very well? Hey?”

“Proper well, in faith, Reuben Dewy.”

“And we won’t sit down in his house; ‘twould be looking too familiar when only just reconciled?”

“No need at all to sit down. Just do our duty man and man, turn round, and march out — he’ll think all the more of us for it.”

“I hardly think Leaf had better go wi’ us?” said Michael, turning to Leaf and taking his measure from top to bottom by the eye. “He’s so terrible silly that he might ruin the concern.”

“He don’t want to go much; do ye, Thomas Leaf?” said William.

“Hee-hee! no; I don’t want to. Only a teeny bit!”

“I be mortal afeard, Leaf, that you’ll never be able to tell how many cuts d’take to sharpen a spar,” said Mail.

“I never had no head, never! that’s how it happened to happen, hee-hee!”

They all assented to this, not with any sense of humiliating Leaf by disparaging him after an open confession, but because it was an accepted thing that Leaf didn’t in the least mind having no head, that deficiency of his being an unimpassioned matter of parish history.

“But I can sing my treble!” continued Thomas Leaf, quite delighted at being called a fool in such a friendly way; “I can sing my treble as well as any maid, or married woman either, and better! And if Jim had lived, I should have had a clever brother! To-morrow is poor Jim’s birthday. He’d ha’ been twenty-six if he’d lived till to-morrow.”

“You always seem very sorry for Jim,” said old William musingly.

“Ah! I do. Such a stay to mother as he’d always ha’ been! She’d never have had to work in her old age if he had continued strong, poor Jim!”

“What was his age when ‘a died?”

“Four hours and twenty minutes, poor Jim. ‘A was born as might be at night; and ‘a didn’t last as might be till the morning. No, ‘a didn’t last. Mother called en Jim

on the day that would ha' been his christening day if he had lived; and she's always thinking about en. You see he died so very young."

"Well, 'twas rather youthful," said Michael.

"Now to my mind that woman is very romantical on the matter o' children?" said the tranter, his eye sweeping his audience.

"Ah, well she mid be," said Leaf. "She had twelve regular one after another, and they all, except myself, died very young; either before they was born or just afterwards."

"Pore feller, too. I suppose th'st want to come wi' us?" the tranter murmured.

"Well, Leaf, you shall come wi' us as yours is such a melancholy family," said old William rather sadly.

"I never see such a melancholy family as that afore in my life," said Reuben. "There's Leaf's mother, poor woman! Every morning I see her eyes mooning out through the panes of glass like a pot-sick winder-flower; and as Leaf sings a very high treble, and we don't know what we should do without en for upper G, we'll let en come as a trate, poor feller."

"Ay, we'll let en come, 'a b'lieve," said Mr. Penny, looking up, as the pull happened to be at that moment.

"Now," continued the tranter, dispersing by a new tone of voice these digressions about Leaf; "as to going to see the pa'son, one of us might call and ask en his meaning, and 'twould be just as well done; but it will add a bit of flourish to the cause if the quire waits on him as a body. Then the great thing to mind is, not for any of our fellers to be nervous; so before starting we'll one and all come to my house and have a rasher of bacon; then every man-jack het a pint of cider into his inside; then we'll warm up an extra drop wi' some mead and a bit of ginger; every one take a thimbleful — just a glimmer of a drop, mind ye, no more, to finish off his inner man — and march off to Pa'son Mayble. Why, sonnies, a man's not himself till he is fortified wi' a bit and a drop? We shall be able to look any gentleman in the face then without shrink or shame."

Mail recovered from a deep meditation and downward glance into the earth in time to give a cordial approval to this line of action, and the meeting adjourned.

CHAPTER IV:

THE INTERVIEW WITH THE VICAR

At six o'clock the next day, the whole body of men in the choir emerged from the tranter's door, and advanced with a firm step down the lane. This dignity of march gradually became obliterated as they went on, and by the time they reached the hill behind the vicarage a faint resemblance to a flock of sheep might have been discerned in the venerable party. A word from the tranter, however, set them right again; and as they descended the hill, the regular tramp, tramp, tramp of the united feet was clearly audible from the vicarage garden. At the opening of the gate there was another short

interval of irregular shuffling, caused by a rather peculiar habit the gate had, when swung open quickly, of striking against the bank and slamming back into the opener's face.

"Now keep step again, will ye?" said the tranter. "It looks better, and more becomes the high class of arrant which has brought us here." Thus they advanced to the door.

At Reuben's ring the more modest of the group turned aside, adjusted their hats, and looked critically at any shrub that happened to lie in the line of vision; endeavouring thus to give a person who chanced to look out of the windows the impression that their request, whatever it was going to be, was rather a casual thought occurring whilst they were inspecting the vicar's shrubbery and grass-plot than a predetermined thing. The tranter, who, coming frequently to the vicarage with luggage, coals, firewood, etc., had none of the awe for its precincts that filled the breasts of most of the others, fixed his eyes firmly on the knocker during this interval of waiting. The knocker having no characteristic worthy of notice, he relinquished it for a knot in one of the door-panels, and studied the winding lines of the grain.

"O, sir, please, here's Tranter Dewy, and old William Dewy, and young Richard Dewy, O, and all the quire too, sir, except the boys, a-come to see you!" said Mr. Maybold's maid-servant to Mr. Maybold, the pupils of her eyes dilating like circles in a pond.

"All the choir?" said the astonished vicar (who may be shortly described as a good-looking young man with courageous eyes, timid mouth, and neutral nose), abandoning his writing and looking at his parlour-maid after speaking, like a man who fancied he had seen her face before but couldn't recollect where.

"And they looks very firm, and Tranter Dewy do turn neither to the right hand nor to the left, but stares quite straight and solemn with his mind made up!"

"O, all the choir," repeated the vicar to himself, trying by that simple device to trot out his thoughts on what the choir could come for.

"Yes; every man-jack of 'em, as I be alive!" (The parlour-maid was rather local in manner, having in fact been raised in the same village.) "Really, sir, 'tis thoughted by many in town and country that — "

"Town and country! — Heavens, I had no idea that I was public property in this way!" said the vicar, his face acquiring a hue somewhere between that of the rose and the peony. "Well, 'It is thought in town and country that — '"

"It is thought that you be going to get it hot and strong! — excusen my incivility, sir."

The vicar suddenly recalled to his recollection that he had long ago settled it to be decidedly a mistake to encourage his servant Jane in giving personal opinions. The servant Jane saw by the vicar's face that he recalled this fact to his mind; and removing her forehead from the edge of the door, and rubbing away the indent that edge had made, vanished into the passage as Mr. Maybold remarked, "Show them in, Jane."

A few minutes later a shuffling and jostling (reduced to as refined a form as was compatible with the nature of shuffles and jostles) was heard in the passage; then an

earnest and prolonged wiping of shoes, conveying the notion that volumes of mud had to be removed; but the roads being so clean that not a particle of dirt appeared on the choir's boots (those of all the elder members being newly oiled, and Dick's brightly polished), this wiping might have been set down simply as a desire to show that respectable men had no wish to take a mean advantage of clean roads for curtailing proper ceremonies. Next there came a powerful whisper from the same quarter:-

"Now stand stock-still there, my sonnies, one and all! And don't make no noise; and keep your backs close to the wall, that company may pass in and out easy if they want to without squeezing through ye: and we two are enough to go in." . . . The voice was the tranter's.

"I wish I could go in too and see the sight!" said a reedy voice — that of Leaf.

"'Tis a pity Leaf is so terrible silly, or else he might," said another.

"I never in my life seed a quire go into a study to have it out about the playing and singing," pleaded Leaf; "and I should like to see it just once!"

"Very well; we'll let en come in," said the tranter. "You'll be like chips in porridge, {1} Leaf — neither good nor hurt. All right, my sonny, come along;" and immediately himself, old William, and Leaf appeared in the room.

"We took the liberty to come and see 'ee, sir," said Reuben, letting his hat hang in his left hand, and touching with his right the brim of an imaginary one on his head. "We've come to see 'ee, sir, man and man, and no offence, I hope?"

"None at all," said Mr. Maybold.

"This old aged man standing by my side is father; William Dewy by name, sir."

"Yes; I see it is," said the vicar, nodding aside to old William, who smiled.

"I thought you mightn't know en without his bass-viol," the tranter apologized. "You see, he always wears his best clothes and his bass-viol a-Sundays, and it do make such a difference in a' old man's look."

"And who's that young man?" the vicar said.

"Tell the pa'son yer name," said the tranter, turning to Leaf, who stood with his elbows nailed back to a bookcase.

"Please, Thomas Leaf, your holiness!" said Leaf, trembling.

"I hope you'll excuse his looks being so very thin," continued the tranter deprecatingly, turning to the vicar again. "But 't isn't his fault, poor feller. He's rather silly by nature, and could never get fat; though he's a' excellent treble, and so we keep him on."

"I never had no head, sir," said Leaf, eagerly grasping at this opportunity for being forgiven his existence.

"Ah, poor young man!" said Mr. Maybold.

"Bless you, he don't mind it a bit, if you don't, sir," said the tranter assuringly. "Do ye, Leaf?"

"Not I — not a morsel — hee, hee! I was afeard it mightn't please your holiness, sir, that's all."

The tranter, finding Leaf get on so very well through his negative qualities, was tempted in a fit of generosity to advance him still higher, by giving him credit for positive ones. "He's very clever for a silly chap, good-now, sir. You never knowed a young feller keep his smock-frocks so clane; very honest too. His ghastly looks is all there is against en, poor feller; but we can't help our looks, you know, sir."

"True: we cannot. You live with your mother, I think, Leaf?"

The tranter looked at Leaf to express that the most friendly assistant to his tongue could do no more for him now, and that he must be left to his own resources.

"Yes, sir: a widder, sir. Ah, if brother Jim had lived she'd have had a clever son to keep her without work!"

"Indeed! poor woman. Give her this half-crown. I'll call and see your mother."

"Say, 'Thank you, sir,'" the tranter whispered imperatively towards Leaf.

"Thank you, sir!" said Leaf.

"That's it, then; sit down, Leaf," said Mr. Maybold.

"Y-yes, sir!"

The tranter cleared his throat after this accidental parenthesis about Leaf, rectified his bodily position, and began his speech.

"Mr. Mayble," he said, "I hope you'll excuse my common way, but I always like to look things in the face."

Reuben made a point of fixing this sentence in the vicar's mind by gazing hard at him at the conclusion of it, and then out of the window.

Mr. Maybold and old William looked in the same direction, apparently under the impression that the things' faces alluded to were there visible.

"What I have been thinking" — the tranter implied by this use of the past tense that he was hardly so discourteous as to be positively thinking it then — "is that the quire ought to be gie'd a little time, and not done away wi' till Christmas, as a fair thing between man and man. And, Mr. Mayble, I hope you'll excuse my common way?"

"I will, I will. Till Christmas," the vicar murmured, stretching the two words to a great length, as if the distance to Christmas might be measured in that way. "Well, I want you all to understand that I have no personal fault to find, and that I don't wish to change the church music by forcible means, or in a way which should hurt the feelings of any parishioners. Why I have at last spoken definitely on the subject is that a player has been brought under — I may say pressed upon — my notice several times by one of the churchwardens. And as the organ I brought with me is here waiting" (pointing to a cabinet-organ standing in the study), "there is no reason for longer delay."

"We made a mistake I suppose then, sir? But we understood the young woman didn't want to play particularly?" The tranter arranged his countenance to signify that he did not want to be inquisitive in the least.

"No, nor did she. Nor did I definitely wish her to just yet; for your playing is very good. But, as I said, one of the churchwardens has been so anxious for a change, that, as matters stand, I couldn't consistently refuse my consent."

Now for some reason or other, the vicar at this point seemed to have an idea that he had prevaricated; and as an honest vicar, it was a thing he determined not to do. He corrected himself, blushing as he did so, though why he should blush was not known to Reuben.

“Understand me rightly,” he said: “the church-warden proposed it to me, but I had thought myself of getting — Miss Day to play.”

“Which churchwarden might that be who proposed her, sir? — excusing my common way.” The tranter intimated by his tone that, so far from being inquisitive, he did not even wish to ask a single question.

“Mr. Shiner, I believe.”

“Clk, my sonny! — beg your pardon, sir, that’s only a form of words of mine, and slipped out accidental — he nourishes enmity against us for some reason or another; perhaps because we played rather hard upon en Christmas night. Anyhow ‘tis certain sure that Mr. Shiner’s real love for music of a particular kind isn’t his reason. He’ve no more ear than that chair. But let that be.”

“I don’t think you should conclude that, because Mr. Shiner wants a different music, he has any ill-feeling for you. I myself, I must own, prefer organ-music to any other. I consider it most proper, and feel justified in endeavouring to introduce it; but then, although other music is better, I don’t say yours is not good.”

“Well then, Mr. Mayble, since death’s to be, we’ll die like men any day you name (excusing my common way).”

Mr. Maybold bowed his head.

“All we thought was, that for us old ancient singers to be choked off quiet at no time in particular, as now, in the Sundays after Easter, would seem rather mean in the eyes of other parishes, sir. But if we fell glorious with a bit of a flourish at Christmas, we should have a respectable end, and not dwindle away at some nameless paltry second-Sunday-after or Sunday-next-before something, that’s got no name of his own.”

“Yes, yes, that’s reasonable; I own it’s reasonable.”

“You see, Mr. Mayble, we’ve got — do I keep you inconvenient long, sir?”

“No, no.”

“We’ve got our feelings — father there especially.”

The tranter, in his earnestness, had advanced his person to within six inches of the vicar’s.

“Certainly, certainly!” said Mr. Maybold, retreating a little for convenience of seeing. “You are all enthusiastic on the subject, and I am all the more gratified to find you so. A Laodicean lukewarmness is worse than wrongheadedness itself.”

“Exactly, sir. In fact now, Mr. Mayble,” Reuben continued, more impressively, and advancing a little closer still to the vicar, “father there is a perfect figure o’ wonder, in the way of being fond of music!”

The vicar drew back a little further, the tranter suddenly also standing back a foot or two, to throw open the view of his father, and pointing to him at the same time.

Old William moved uneasily in the large chair, and with a minute smile on the mere edge of his lips, for good-manners, said he was indeed very fond of tunes.

“Now, you see exactly how it is,” Reuben continued, appealing to Mr. Maybold’s sense of justice by looking sideways into his eyes. The vicar seemed to see how it was so well that the gratified tranter walked up to him again with even vehement eagerness, so that his waistcoat-buttons almost rubbed against the vicar’s as he continued: “As to father, if you or I, or any man or woman of the present generation, at the time music is a-playing, was to shake your fist in father’s face, as may be this way, and say, ‘Don’t you be delighted with that music!’” — the tranter went back to where Leaf was sitting, and held his fist so close to Leaf’s face that the latter pressed his head back against the wall: “All right, Leaf, my sonny, I won’t hurt you; ‘tis just to show my meaning to Mr. Mayble. — As I was saying, if you or I, or any man, was to shake your fist in father’s face this way, and say, ‘William, your life or your music!’ he’d say, ‘My life!’ Now that’s father’s nature all over; and you see, sir, it must hurt the feelings of a man of that kind for him and his bass-viol to be done away wi’ neck and crop.”

The tranter went back to the vicar’s front and again looked earnestly at his face.

“True, true, Dewy,” Mr. Maybold answered, trying to withdraw his head and shoulders without moving his feet; but finding this impracticable, edging back another inch. These frequent retreats had at last jammed Mr. Maybold between his easy-chair and the edge of the table.

And at the moment of the announcement of the choir, Mr. Maybold had just re-dipped the pen he was using; at their entry, instead of wiping it, he had laid it on the table with the nib overhanging. At the last retreat his coat-tails came in contact with the pen, and down it rolled, first against the back of the chair, thence turning a summersault into the seat, thence falling to the floor with a rattle.

The vicar stooped for his pen, and the tranter, wishing to show that, however great their ecclesiastical differences, his mind was not so small as to let this affect his social feelings, stooped also.

“And have you anything else you want to explain to me, Dewy?” said Mr. Maybold from under the table.

“Nothing, sir. And, Mr. Mayble, you be not offended? I hope you see our desire is reason?” said the tranter from under the chair.

“Quite, quite; and I shouldn’t think of refusing to listen to such a reasonable request,” the vicar replied. Seeing that Reuben had secured the pen, he resumed his vertical position, and added, “You know, Dewy, it is often said how difficult a matter it is to act up to our convictions and please all parties. It may be said with equal truth, that it is difficult for a man of any appreciativeness to have convictions at all. Now in my case, I see right in you, and right in Shiner. I see that violins are good, and that an organ is good; and when we introduce the organ, it will not be that fiddles were bad, but that an organ was better. That you’ll clearly understand, Dewy?”

“I will; and thank you very much for such feelings, sir. Piph-h-h-h! How the blood do get into my head, to be sure, whenever I quat down like that!” said Reuben, who

having also risen to his feet stuck the pen vertically in the inkstand and almost through the bottom, that it might not roll down again under any circumstances whatever.

Now the ancient body of minstrels in the passage felt their curiosity surging higher and higher as the minutes passed. Dick, not having much affection for this errand, soon grew tired, and went away in the direction of the school. Yet their sense of propriety would probably have restrained them from any attempt to discover what was going on in the study had not the vicar's pen fallen to the floor. The conviction that the movement of chairs, etc., necessitated by the search, could only have been caused by the catastrophe of a bloody fight beginning, overpowered all other considerations; and they advanced to the door, which had only just fallen to. Thus, when Mr. Maybold raised his eyes after the stooping he beheld glaring through the door Mr. Penny in full-length portraiture, Mail's face and shoulders above Mr. Penny's head, Spinks's forehead and eyes over Mail's crown, and a fractional part of Bowman's countenance under Spinks's arm — crescent-shaped portions of other heads and faces being visible behind these — the whole dozen and odd eyes bristling with eager inquiry.

Mr. Penny, as is the case with excitable boot-makers and men, seeing the vicar look at him and hearing no word spoken, thought it incumbent upon himself to say something of any kind. Nothing suggested itself till he had looked for about half a minute at the vicar.

"You'll excuse my naming of it, sir," he said, regarding with much commiseration the mere surface of the vicar's face; "but perhaps you don't know that your chin have bust out a-bleeding where you cut yourself a-shaving this morning, sir."

"Now, that was the stooping, depend upon't," the tranter suggested, also looking with much interest at the vicar's chin. "Blood always will bust out again if you hang down the member that's been bleeding."

Old William raised his eyes and watched the vicar's bleeding chin likewise; and Leaf advanced two or three paces from the bookcase, absorbed in the contemplation of the same phenomenon, with parted lips and delighted eyes.

"Dear me, dear me!" said Mr. Maybold hastily, looking very red, and brushing his chin with his hand, then taking out his handkerchief and wiping the place.

"That's it, sir; all right again now, 'a b'lieve — a mere nothing," said Mr. Penny. "A little bit of fur off your hat will stop it in a minute if it should bust out again."

"I'll let 'ee have a bit off mine," said Reuben, to show his good feeling; "my hat isn't so new as yours, sir, and 'twon't hurt mine a bit."

"No, no; thank you, thank you," Mr. Maybold again nervously replied.

"'Twas rather a deep cut seemingly?" said Reuben, feeling these to be the kindest and best remarks he could make.

"O, no; not particularly."

"Well, sir, your hand will shake sometimes a-shaving, and just when it comes into your head that you may cut yourself, there's the blood."

"I have been revolving in my mind that question of the time at which we make the change," said Mr. Maybold, "and I know you'll meet me half-way. I think Christmas-day

as much too late for me as the present time is too early for you. I suggest Michaelmas or thereabout as a convenient time for both parties; for I think your objection to a Sunday which has no name is not one of any real weight.”

“Very good, sir. I suppose mortal men mustn’t expect their own way entirely; and I express in all our names that we’ll make shift and be satisfied with what you say.” The tranter touched the brim of his imaginary hat again, and all the choir did the same. “About Michaelmas, then, as far as you are concerned, sir, and then we make room for the next generation.”

“About Michaelmas,” said the vicar.

CHAPTER V:

RETURNING HOME WARD

“‘A took it very well, then?’” said Mail, as they all walked up the hill.

“He behaved like a man, ‘a did so,” said the tranter. “And I’m glad we’ve let en know our minds. And though, beyond that, we ha’n’t got much by going, ‘twas worth while. He won’t forget it. Yes, he took it very well. Supposing this tree here was Pa’son Mayble, and I standing here, and thik gr’t stone is father sitting in the easy-chair. ‘Dewy,’ says he, ‘I don’t wish to change the church music in a forcible way.’”

“That was very nice o’ the man, even though words be wind.”

“Proper nice — out and out nice. The fact is,” said Reuben confidentially, “‘tis how you take a man. Everybody must be managed. Queens must be managed: kings must be managed; for men want managing almost as much as women, and that’s saying a good deal.”

“‘Tis truly!” murmured the husbands.

“Pa’son Mayble and I were as good friends all through it as if we’d been sworn brothers. Ay, the man’s well enough; ‘tis what’s put in his head that spoils him, and that’s why we’ve got to go.”

“There’s really no believing half you hear about people nowadays.”

“Bless ye, my sonnies! ‘tisn’t the pa’son’s move at all. That gentleman over there” (the tranter nodded in the direction of Shiner’s farm) “is at the root of the mischty.”

“What! Shiner?”

“Ay; and I see what the pa’son don’t see. Why, Shiner is for putting forward that young woman that only last night I was saying was our Dick’s sweet-heart, but I suppose can’t be, and making much of her in the sight of the congregation, and thinking he’ll win her by showing her off. Well, perhaps ‘a woll.”

“Then the music is second to the woman, the other churchwarden is second to Shiner, the pa’son is second to the churchwardens, and God A’mighty is nowhere at all.”

“That’s true; and you see,” continued Reuben, “at the very beginning it put me in a stud as to how to quarrel wi’ en. In short, to save my soul, I couldn’t quarrel wi’ such a civil man without belying my conscience. Says he to father there, in a voice as

quiet as a lamb's, 'William, you are a' old aged man, as all shall be, so sit down in my easy-chair, and rest yourself.' And down father zot. I could fain ha' laughed at thee, father; for thou'st take it so unconcerned at first, and then looked so frightened when the chair-bottom sunk in."

"You see," said old William, hastening to explain, "I was scared to find the bottom gie way — what should I know o' spring bottoms? — and thought I had broke it down: and of course as to breaking down a man's chair, I didn't wish any such thing."

"And, neighbours, when a feller, ever so much up for a miff, d'see his own father sitting in his enemy's easy-chair, and a poor chap like Leaf made the best of, as if he almost had brains — why, it knocks all the wind out of his sail at once: it did out of mine."

"If that young figure of fun — Fance Day, I mean," said Bowman, "hadn't been so mighty forward wi' showing herself off to Shiner and Dick and the rest, 'tis my belief we should never ha' left the gallery."

"'Tis my belief that though Shiner fired the bullets, the parson made 'em," said Mr. Penny. "My wife sticks to it that he's in love wi' her."

"That's a thing we shall never know. I can't onriddle her, nohow."

"Thou'st ought to be able to onriddle such a little chiel as she," the tranter observed.

"The littler the maid, the bigger the riddle, to my mind. And coming of such a stock, too, she may well be a twister."

"Yes; Geoffrey Day is a clever man if ever there was one. Never says anything: not he."

"Never."

"You might live wi' that man, my sonnies, a hundred years, and never know there was anything in him."

"Ay; one o' these up-country London ink-bottle chaps would call Geoffrey a fool."

"Ye never find out what's in that man: never," said Spinks. "Close? ah, he is close! He can hold his tongue well. That man's dumbness is wonderful to listen to."

"There's so much sense in it. Every moment of it is brimmen over wi' sound understanding."

"'A can hold his tongue very clever — very clever truly," echoed Leaf. "'A do look at me as if 'a could see my thoughts running round like the works of a clock."

"Well, all will agree that the man can halt well in his talk, be it a long time or be it a short time. And though we can't expect his daughter to inherit his closeness, she may have a few dribblets from his sense."

"And his pocket, perhaps."

"Yes; the nine hundred pound that everybody says he's worth; but I call it four hundred and fifty; for I never believe more than half I hear."

"Well, he've made a pound or two, and I suppose the maid will have it, since there's nobody else. But 'tis rather sharp upon her, if she's been born to fortune, to bring her up as if not born for it, and letting her work so hard."

"'Tis all upon his principle. A long-headed feller!"

“Ah,” murmured Spinks, “’twould be sharper upon her if she were born for fortune, and not to it! I suffer from that affliction.”

CHAPTER VI:

YALBURY WOOD AND THE KEEPER’S HOUSE

A mood of blitheness rarely experienced even by young men was Dick’s on the following Monday morning. It was the week after the Easter holidays, and he was journeying along with Smart the mare and the light spring-cart, watching the damp slopes of the hill-sides as they streamed in the warmth of the sun, which at this unsettled season shone on the grass with the freshness of an occasional inspector rather than as an accustomed proprietor. His errand was to fetch Fancy, and some additional household goods, from her father’s house in the neighbouring parish to her dwelling at Mellstock. The distant view was darkly shaded with clouds; but the nearer parts of the landscape were whitely illumined by the visible rays of the sun streaming down across the heavy gray shade behind.

The tranter had not yet told his son of the state of Shiner’s heart that had been suggested to him by Shiner’s movements. He preferred to let such delicate affairs right themselves; experience having taught him that the uncertain phenomenon of love, as it existed in other people, was not a groundwork upon which a single action of his own life could be founded.

Geoffrey Day lived in the depths of Yalbury Wood, which formed portion of one of the outlying estates of the Earl of Wessex, to whom Day was head game-keeper, timber-steward, and general overlooker for this district. The wood was intersected by the highway from Casterbridge to London at a place not far from the house, and some trees had of late years been felled between its windows and the ascent of Yalbury Hill, to give the solitary cottager a glimpse of the passers-by.

It was a satisfaction to walk into the keeper’s house, even as a stranger, on a fine spring morning like the present. A curl of wood-smoke came from the chimney, and drooped over the roof like a blue feather in a lady’s hat; and the sun shone obliquely upon the patch of grass in front, which reflected its brightness through the open doorway and up the staircase opposite, lighting up each riser with a shiny green radiance, and leaving the top of each step in shade.

The window-sill of the front room was between four and five feet from the floor, dropping inwardly to a broad low bench, over which, as well as over the whole surface of the wall beneath, there always hung a deep shade, which was considered objectionable on every ground save one, namely, that the perpetual sprinkling of seeds and water by the caged canary above was not noticed as an eyesore by visitors. The window was set with thickly-leaded diamond glazing, formed, especially in the lower panes, of knotty glass of various shades of green. Nothing was better known to Fancy than the extravagant manner in which these circular knots or eyes distorted everything

seen through them from the outside — lifting hats from heads, shoulders from bodies; scattering the spokes of cart-wheels, and bending the straight fir-trunks into semicircles. The ceiling was carried by a beam traversing its midst, from the side of which projected a large nail, used solely and constantly as a peg for Geoffrey's hat; the nail was arched by a rainbow-shaped stain, imprinted by the brim of the said hat when it was hung there dripping wet.

The most striking point about the room was the furniture. This was a repetition upon inanimate objects of the old principle introduced by Noah, consisting for the most part of two articles of every sort. The duplicate system of furnishing owed its existence to the forethought of Fancy's mother, exercised from the date of Fancy's birthday onwards. The arrangement spoke for itself: nobody who knew the tone of the household could look at the goods without being aware that the second set was a provision for Fancy, when she should marry and have a house of her own. The most noticeable instance was a pair of green-faced eight-day clocks, ticking alternately, which were severally two and half minutes and three minutes striking the hour of twelve, one proclaiming, in Italian flourishes, Thomas Wood as the name of its maker, and the other — arched at the top, and altogether of more cynical appearance — that of Ezekiel Saunders. They were two departed clockmakers of Casterbridge, whose desperate rivalry throughout their lives was nowhere more emphatically perpetuated than here at Geoffrey's. These chief specimens of the marriage provision were supported on the right by a couple of kitchen dressers, each fitted complete with their cups, dishes, and plates, in their turn followed by two dumb-waiters, two family Bibles, two warming-pans, and two intermixed sets of chairs.

But the position last reached — the chimney-corner — was, after all, the most attractive side of the parallelogram. It was large enough to admit, in addition to Geoffrey himself, Geoffrey's wife, her chair, and her work-table, entirely within the line of the mantel, without danger or even inconvenience from the heat of the fire; and was spacious enough overhead to allow of the insertion of wood poles for the hanging of bacon, which were cloaked with long shreds of soot, floating on the draught like the tattered banners on the walls of ancient aisles.

These points were common to most chimney corners of the neighbourhood; but one feature there was which made Geoffrey's fireside not only an object of interest to casual aristocratic visitors — to whom every cottage fireside was more or less a curiosity — but the admiration of friends who were accustomed to fireplaces of the ordinary hamlet model. This peculiarity was a little window in the chimney-back, almost over the fire, around which the smoke crept caressingly when it left the perpendicular course. The window-board was curiously stamped with black circles, burnt thereon by the heated bottoms of drinking-cups, which had rested there after previously standing on the hot ashes of the hearth for the purpose of warming their contents, the result giving to the ledge the look of an envelope which has passed through innumerable post-offices.

Fancy was gliding about the room preparing dinner, her head inclining now to the right, now to the left, and singing the tips and ends of tunes that sprang up in her

mind like mushrooms. The footsteps of Mrs. Day could be heard in the room overhead. Fancy went finally to the door.

“Father! Dinner.”

A tall spare figure was seen advancing by the window with periodical steps, and the keeper entered from the garden. He appeared to be a man who was always looking down, as if trying to recollect something he said yesterday. The surface of his face was fissured rather than wrinkled, and over and under his eyes were folds which seemed as a kind of exterior eyelids. His nose had been thrown backwards by a blow in a poaching fray, so that when the sun was low and shining in his face, people could see far into his head. There was in him a quiet grimness, which would in his moments of displeasure have become surliness, had it not been tempered by honesty of soul, and which was often wrongheadedness because not allied with subtlety.

Although not an extraordinarily taciturn man among friends slightly richer than himself, he never wasted words upon outsiders, and to his trapper Enoch his ideas were seldom conveyed by any other means than nods and shakes of the head. Their long acquaintance with each other’s ways, and the nature of their labours, rendered words between them almost superfluous as vehicles of thought, whilst the coincidence of their horizons, and the astonishing equality of their social views, by startling the keeper from time to time as very damaging to the theory of master and man, strictly forbade any indulgence in words as courtesies.

Behind the keeper came Enoch (who had been assisting in the garden) at the well-considered chronological distance of three minutes — an interval of non-appearance on the trapper’s part not arrived at without some reflection. Four minutes had been found to express indifference to indoor arrangements, and simultaneousness had implied too great an anxiety about meals.

“A little earlier than usual, Fancy,” the keeper said, as he sat down and looked at the clocks. “That Ezekiel Saunders o’ thine is tearing on afore Thomas Wood again.”

“I kept in the middle between them,” said Fancy, also looking at the two clocks.

“Better stick to Thomas,” said her father. “There’s a healthy beat in Thomas that would lead a man to swear by en offhand. He is as true as the town time. How is it your stap-mother isn’t here?”

As Fancy was about to reply, the rattle of wheels was heard, and “Weh-hey, Smart!” in Mr. Richard Dewy’s voice rolled into the cottage from round the corner of the house.

“Hullo! there’s Dewy’s cart come for thee, Fancy — Dick driving — afore time, too. Well, ask the lad to have pot-luck with us.”

Dick on entering made a point of implying by his general bearing that he took an interest in Fancy simply as in one of the same race and country as himself; and they all sat down. Dick could have wished her manner had not been so entirely free from all apparent consciousness of those accidental meetings of theirs: but he let the thought pass. Enoch sat diagonally at a table afar off, under the corner cupboard, and drank his cider from a long perpendicular pint cup, having tall fir-trees done in brown on its sides. He threw occasional remarks into the general tide of conversation, and with this

advantage to himself, that he participated in the pleasures of a talk (slight as it was) at meal-times, without saddling himself with the responsibility of sustaining it.

“Why don’t your stap-mother come down, Fancy?” said Geoffrey. “You’ll excuse her, Mister Dick, she’s a little queer sometimes.”

“O yes, — quite,” said Richard, as if he were in the habit of excusing people every day.

“She d’belong to that class of womankind that become second wives: a rum class rather.”

“Indeed,” said Dick, with sympathy for an indefinite something.

“Yes; and ‘tis trying to a female, especially if you’ve been a first wife, as she hev.”

“Very trying it must be.”

“Yes: you see her first husband was a young man, who let her go too far; in fact, she used to kick up Bob’s-a-dying at the least thing in the world. And when I’d married her and found it out, I thought, thinks I, ‘Tis too late now to begin to cure ‘e;’ and so I let her bide. But she’s queer, — very queer, at times!”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Yes: there; wives be such a provoking class o’ society, because though they be never right, they be never more than half wrong.”

Fancy seemed uneasy under the infliction of this household moralising, which might tend to damage the airy-fairy nature that Dick, as maiden shrewdness told her, had accredited her with. Her dead silence impressed Geoffrey with the notion that something in his words did not agree with her educated ideas, and he changed the conversation.

“Did Fred Shiner send the cask o’ drink, Fancy?”

“I think he did: O yes, he did.”

“Nice solid feller, Fred Shiner!” said Geoffrey to Dick as he helped himself to gravy, bringing the spoon round to his plate by way of the potato-dish, to obviate a stain on the cloth in the event of a spill.

Now Geoffrey’s eyes had been fixed upon his plate for the previous four or five minutes, and in removing them he had only carried them to the spoon, which, from its fulness and the distance of its transit, necessitated a steady watching through the whole of the route. Just as intently as the keeper’s eyes had been fixed on the spoon, Fancy’s had been fixed on her father’s, without premeditation or the slightest phase of furtiveness; but there they were fastened. This was the reason why:

Dick was sitting next to her on the right side, and on the side of the table opposite to her father. Fancy had laid her right hand lightly down upon the table-cloth for an instant, and to her alarm Dick, after dropping his fork and brushing his forehead as a reason, flung down his own left hand, overlapping a third of Fancy’s with it, and keeping it there. So the innocent Fancy, instead of pulling her hand from the trap, settled her eyes on her father’s, to guard against his discovery of this perilous game of Dick’s. Dick finished his mouthful; Fancy finished her crumb, and nothing was done beyond watching Geoffrey’s eyes. Then the hands slid apart; Fancy’s going over six inches of cloth, Dick’s over one. Geoffrey’s eye had risen.

"I said Fred Shiner is a nice solid feller," he repeated, more emphatically.

"He is; yes, he is," stammered Dick; "but to me he is little more than a stranger."

"O, sure. Now I know en as well as any man can be known. And you know en very well too, don't ye, Fancy?"

Geoffrey put on a tone expressing that these words signified at present about one hundred times the amount of meaning they conveyed literally.

Dick looked anxious.

"Will you pass me some bread?" said Fancy in a flurry, the red of her face becoming slightly disordered, and looking as solicitous as a human being could look about a piece of bread.

"Ay, that I will," replied the unconscious Geoffrey. "Ay," he continued, returning to the displaced idea, "we are likely to remain friendly wi' Mr. Shiner if the wheels d'run smooth."

"An excellent thing — a very capital thing, as I should say," the youth answered with exceeding relevance, considering that his thoughts, instead of following Geoffrey's remark, were nestling at a distance of about two feet on his left the whole time.

"A young woman's face will turn the north wind, Master Richard: my heart if 'twon't." Dick looked more anxious and was attentive in earnest at these words. "Yes; turn the north wind," added Geoffrey after an impressive pause. "And though she's one of my own flesh and blood . . ."

"Will you fetch down a bit of raw-mil' cheese from pantry-shelf?" Fancy interrupted, as if she were famishing.

"Ay, that I will, chiel; chiel, says I, and Mr. Shiner only asking last Saturday night . . . cheese you said, Fancy?"

Dick controlled his emotion at these mysterious allusions to Mr. Shiner, — the better enabled to do so by perceiving that Fancy's heart went not with her father's — and spoke like a stranger to the affairs of the neighbourhood. "Yes, there's a great deal to be said upon the power of maiden faces in settling your courses," he ventured, as the keeper retreated for the cheese.

"The conversation is taking a very strange turn: nothing that I have ever done warrants such things being said!" murmured Fancy with emphasis, just loud enough to reach Dick's ears.

"You think to yourself, 'twas to be," cried Enoch from his distant corner, by way of filling up the vacancy caused by Geoffrey's momentary absence. "And so you marry her, Master Dewy, and there's an end o't."

"Pray don't say such things, Enoch," came from Fancy severely, upon which Enoch relapsed into servitude.

"If we be doomed to marry, we marry; if we be doomed to remain single, we do," replied Dick.

Geoffrey had by this time sat down again, and he now made his lips thin by severely straining them across his gums, and looked out of the window along the vista to the

distant highway up Yalbury Hill. "That's not the case with some folk," he said at length, as if he read the words on a board at the further end of the vista.

Fancy looked interested, and Dick said, "No?"

"There's that wife o' mine. It was her doom to be nobody's wife at all in the wide universe. But she made up her mind that she would, and did it twice over. Doom? Doom is nothing beside a elderly woman — quite a chiel in her hands!"

A movement was now heard along the upstairs passage, and footsteps descending. The door at the foot of the stairs opened, and the second Mrs. Day appeared in view, looking fixedly at the table as she advanced towards it, with apparent obliviousness of the presence of any other human being than herself. In short, if the table had been the personages, and the persons the table, her glance would have been the most natural imaginable.

She showed herself to possess an ordinary woman's face, iron-grey hair, hardly any hips, and a great deal of cleanliness in a broad white apron-string, as it appeared upon the waist of her dark stuff dress.

"People will run away with a story now, I suppose," she began saying, "that Jane Day's tablecloths are as poor and ragged as any union beggar's!"

Dick now perceived that the tablecloth was a little the worse for wear, and reflecting for a moment, concluded that 'people' in step-mother language probably meant himself. On lifting his eyes he found that Mrs. Day had vanished again upstairs, and presently returned with an armful of new damask-linen tablecloths, folded square and hard as boards by long compression. These she flounced down into a chair; then took one, shook it out from its folds, and spread it on the table by instalments, transferring the plates and dishes one by one from the old to the new cloth.

"And I suppose they'll say, too, that she ha'n't a decent knife and fork in her house!"

"I shouldn't say any such ill-natured thing, I am sure — " began Dick. But Mrs. Day had vanished into the next room. Fancy appeared distressed.

"Very strange woman, isn't she?" said Geoffrey, quietly going on with his dinner. "But 'tis too late to attempt curing. My heart! 'tis so growed into her that 'twould kill her to take it out. Ay, she's very queer: you'd be amazed to see what valuable goods we've got stowed away upstairs."

Back again came Mrs. Day with a box of bright steel horn-handled knives, silver-plated forks, carver, and all complete. These were wiped of the preservative oil which coated them, and then a knife and fork were laid down to each individual with a bang, the carving knife and fork thrust into the meat dish, and the old ones they had hitherto used tossed away.

Geoffrey placidly cut a slice with the new knife and fork, and asked Dick if he wanted any more.

The table had been spread for the mixed midday meal of dinner and tea, which was common among frugal countryfolk. "The parishioners about here," continued Mrs. Day, not looking at any living being, but snatching up the brown delf tea-things, "are the laziest, gossipest, poachest, jailest set of any ever I came among. And they'll talk

about my teapot and tea-things next, I suppose!" She vanished with the teapot, cups, and saucers, and reappeared with a tea-service in white china, and a packet wrapped in brown paper. This was removed, together with folds of tissue-paper underneath; and a brilliant silver teapot appeared.

"I'll help to put the things right," said Fancy soothingly, and rising from her seat. "I ought to have laid out better things, I suppose. But" (here she enlarged her looks so as to include Dick) "I have been away from home a good deal, and I make shocking blunders in my housekeeping." Smiles and suavity were then dispensed all around by this bright little bird.

After a little more preparation and modification, Mrs. Day took her seat at the head of the table, and during the latter or tea division of the meal, presided with much composure. It may cause some surprise to learn that, now her vagary was over, she showed herself to be an excellent person with much common sense, and even a religious seriousness of tone on matters pertaining to her afflictions.

CHAPTER VII:

DICK MAKES HIMSELF USEFUL

The effect of Geoffrey's incidental allusions to Mr. Shiner was to restrain a considerable flow of spontaneous chat that would otherwise have burst from young Dewy along the drive homeward. And a certain remark he had hazarded to her, in rather too blunt and eager a manner, kept the young lady herself even more silent than Dick. On both sides there was an unwillingness to talk on any but the most trivial subjects, and their sentences rarely took a larger form than could be expressed in two or three words.

Owing to Fancy being later in the day than she had promised, the charwoman had given up expecting her; whereupon Dick could do no less than stay and see her comfortably tided over the disagreeable time of entering and establishing herself in an empty house after an absence of a week. The additional furniture and utensils that had been brought (a canary and cage among the rest) were taken out of the vehicle, and the horse was unharnessed and put in the plot opposite, where there was some tender grass. Dick lighted the fire already laid; and activity began to loosen their tongues a little.

"There!" said Fancy, "we forgot to bring the fire-irons!"

She had originally found in her sitting-room, to bear out the expression 'nearly furnished' which the school-manager had used in his letter to her, a table, three chairs, a fender, and a piece of carpet. This 'nearly' had been supplemented hitherto by a kind friend, who had lent her fire-irons and crockery until she should fetch some from home.

Dick attended to the young lady's fire, using his whip-handle for a poker till it was spoilt, and then flourishing a hurdle stick for the remainder of the time.

"The kettle boils; now you shall have a cup of tea," said Fancy, diving into the hamper she had brought.

"Thank you," said Dick, whose drive had made him ready for some, especially in her company.

"Well, here's only one cup-and-saucer, as I breathe! Whatever could mother be thinking about? Do you mind making shift, Mr. Dewy?"

"Not at all, Miss Day," said that civil person.

"— And only having a cup by itself? or a saucer by itself?"

"Don't mind in the least."

"Which do you mean by that?"

"I mean the cup, if you like the saucer."

"And the saucer, if I like the cup?"

"Exactly, Miss Day."

"Thank you, Mr. Dewy, for I like the cup decidedly. Stop a minute; there are no spoons now!" She dived into the hamper again, and at the end of two or three minutes looked up and said, "I suppose you don't mind if I can't find a spoon?"

"Not at all," said the agreeable Richard.

"The fact is, the spoons have slipped down somewhere; right under the other things. O yes, here's one, and only one. You would rather have one than not, I suppose, Mr. Dewy?"

"Rather not. I never did care much about spoons."

"Then I'll have it. I do care about them. You must stir up your tea with a knife. Would you mind lifting the kettle off, that it may not boil dry?"

Dick leapt to the fireplace, and earnestly removed the kettle.

"There! you did it so wildly that you have made your hand black. We always use kettle-holders; didn't you learn housewifery as far as that, Mr. Dewy? Well, never mind the soot on your hand. Come here. I am going to rinse mine, too."

They went to a basin she had placed in the back room. "This is the only basin I have," she said. "Turn up your sleeves, and by that time my hands will be washed, and you can come."

Her hands were in the water now. "O, how vexing!" she exclaimed. "There's not a drop of water left for you, unless you draw it, and the well is I don't know how many furlongs deep; all that was in the pitcher I used for the kettle and this basin. Do you mind dipping the tips of your fingers in the same?"

"Not at all. And to save time I won't wait till you have done, if you have no objection?"

Thereupon he plunged in his hands, and they paddled together. It being the first time in his life that he had touched female fingers under water, Dick duly registered the sensation as rather a nice one.

"Really, I hardly know which are my own hands and which are yours, they have got so mixed up together," she said, withdrawing her own very suddenly.

"It doesn't matter at all," said Dick, "at least as far as I am concerned."

“There! no towel! Whoever thinks of a towel till the hands are wet?”

“Nobody.”

“‘Nobody.’ How very dull it is when people are so friendly! Come here, Mr. Dewy. Now do you think you could lift the lid of that box with your elbow, and then, with something or other, take out a towel you will find under the clean clothes? Be sure don’t touch any of them with your wet hands, for the things at the top are all Starched and Ironed.”

Dick managed, by the aid of a knife and fork, to extract a towel from under a muslin dress without wetting the latter; and for a moment he ventured to assume a tone of criticism.

“I fear for that dress,” he said, as they wiped their hands together.

“What?” said Miss Day, looking into the box at the dress alluded to. “O, I know what you mean — that the vicar will never let me wear muslin?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I know it is condemned by all orders in the church as flaunting, and unfit for common wear for girls who’ve their living to get; but we’ll see.”

“In the interest of the church, I hope you don’t speak seriously.”

“Yes, I do; but we’ll see.” There was a comely determination on her lip, very pleasant to a beholder who was neither bishop, priest, nor deacon. “I think I can manage any vicar’s views about me if he’s under forty.”

Dick rather wished she had never thought of managing vicars.

“I certainly shall be glad to get some of your delicious tea,” he said in rather a free way, yet modestly, as became one in a position between that of visitor and inmate, and looking wistfully at his lonely saucer.

“So shall I. Now is there anything else we want, Mr Dewy?”

“I really think there’s nothing else, Miss Day.”

She prepared to sit down, looking musingly out of the window at Smart’s enjoyment of the rich grass. “Nobody seems to care about me,” she murmured, with large lost eyes fixed upon the sky beyond Smart.

“Perhaps Mr. Shiner does,” said Dick, in the tone of a slightly injured man.

“Yes, I forgot — he does, I know.” Dick precipitately regretted that he had suggested Shiner, since it had produced such a miserable result as this.

“I’ll warrant you’ll care for somebody very much indeed another day, won’t you, Mr. Dewy?” she continued, looking very feelingly into the mathematical centre of his eyes.

“Ah, I’ll warrant I shall,” said Dick, feelingly too, and looking back into her dark pupils, whereupon they were turned aside.

“I meant,” she went on, preventing him from speaking just as he was going to narrate a forcible story about his feelings; “I meant that nobody comes to see if I have returned — not even the vicar.”

“If you want to see him, I’ll call at the vicarage directly we have had some tea.”

“No, no! Don’t let him come down here, whatever you do, whilst I am in such a state of disarrangement. Parsons look so miserable and awkward when one’s house is

in a muddle; walking about, and making impossible suggestions in quaint academic phrases till your flesh creeps and you wish them dead. Do you take sugar?"

Mr. Maybold was at this instant seen coming up the path.

"There! That's he coming! How I wish you were not here! — that is, how awkward — dear, dear!" she exclaimed, with a quick ascent of blood to her face, and irritated with Dick rather than the vicar, as it seemed.

"Pray don't be alarmed on my account, Miss Day — good-afternoon!" said Dick in a huff, putting on his hat, and leaving the room hastily by the back-door.

The horse was caught and put in, and on mounting the shafts to start he saw through the window the vicar, standing upon some books piled in a chair, and driving a nail into the wall; Fancy, with a demure glance, holding the canary-cage up to him, as if she had never in her life thought of anything but vicars and canaries.

CHAPTER VIII:

DICK MEETS HIS FATHER

For several minutes Dick drove along homeward, with the inner eye of reflection so anxiously set on his passages at arms with Fancy, that the road and scenery were as a thin mist over the real pictures of his mind. Was she a coquette? The balance between the evidence that she did love him and that she did not was so nicely struck, that his opinion had no stability. She had let him put his hand upon hers; she had allowed her gaze to drop plumb into the depths of his — his into hers — three or four times; her manner had been very free with regard to the basin and towel; she had appeared vexed at the mention of Shiner. On the other hand, she had driven him about the house like a quiet dog or cat, said Shiner cared for her, and seemed anxious that Mr. Maybold should do the same.

Thinking thus as he neared the handpost at Mellstock Cross, sitting on the front board of the spring cart — his legs on the outside, and his whole frame jiggling up and down like a candle-flame to the time of Smart's trotting — who should he see coming down the hill but his father in the light wagon, quivering up and down on a smaller scale of shakes, those merely caused by the stones in the road. They were soon crossing each other's front.

"Weh-hey!" said the tranter to Smiler.

"Weh-hey!" said Dick to Smart, in an echo of the same voice.

"Th'st hauled her back, I suppose?" Reuben inquired peaceably.

"Yes," said Dick, with such a clinching period at the end that it seemed he was never going to add another word. Smiler, thinking this the close of the conversation, prepared to move on.

"Weh-hey!" said the tranter. "I tell thee what it is, Dick. That there maid is taking up thy thoughts more than's good for thee, my sonny. Thou'rt never happy now unless th'rt making thyself miserable about her in one way or another."

"I don't know about that, father," said Dick rather stupidly.

"But I do — Wey, Smiler! — 'Od rot the women, 'tis nothing else wi' 'em nowadays but getting young men and leading 'em astray."

"Pooh, father! you just repeat what all the common world says; that's all you do."

"The world's a very sensible feller on things in jeneral, Dick; very sensible indeed."

Dick looked into the distance at a vast expanse of mortgaged estate. "I wish I was as rich as a squire when he's as poor as a crow," he murmured; "I'd soon ask Fancy something."

"I wish so too, wi' all my heart, sonny; that I do. Well, mind what beest about, that's all."

Smart moved on a step or two. "Supposing now, father, — We-hey, Smart! — I did think a little about her, and I had a chance, which I ha'n't; don't you think she's a very good sort of — of — one?"

"Ay, good; she's good enough. When you've made up your mind to marry, take the first respectable body that comes to hand — she's as good as any other; they be all alike in the groundwork; 'tis only in the flourishes there's a difference. She's good enough; but I can't see what the nation a young feller like you — wi' a comfortable house and home, and father and mother to take care o' thee, and who sent 'ee to a school so good that 'twas hardly fair to the other children — should want to go hollering after a young woman for, when she's quietly making a husband in her pocket, and not troubled by chick nor chiel, to make a poverty-stric' wife and family of her, and neither hat, cap, wig, nor waistcoat to set 'em up with: be drowned if I can see it, and that's the long and the short o't, my sonny."

Dick looked at Smart's ears, then up the hill; but no reason was suggested by any object that met his gaze.

"For about the same reason that you did, father, I suppose."

"Dang it, my sonny, thou'st got me there!" And the tranter gave vent to a grim admiration, with the mien of a man who was too magnanimous not to appreciate artistically a slight rap on the knuckles, even if they were his own.

"Whether or no," said Dick, "I asked her a thing going along the road."

"Come to that, is it? Turk! won't thy mother be in a taking! Well, she's ready, I don't doubt?"

"I didn't ask her anything about having me; and if you'll let me speak, I'll tell 'ee what I want to know. I just said, Did she care about me?"

"Piph-ph-ph!"

"And then she said nothing for a quarter of a mile, and then she said she didn't know. Now, what I want to know is, what was the meaning of that speech?" The latter words were spoken resolutely, as if he didn't care for the ridicule of all the fathers in creation.

"The meaning of that speech is," the tranter replied deliberately, "that the meaning is meant to be rather hid at present. Well, Dick, as an honest father to thee, I don't pretend to deny what you d'know well enough; that is, that her father being

rather better in the pocket than we, I should welcome her ready enough if it must be somebody.”

“But what d’ye think she really did mean?” said the unsatisfied Dick.

“I’m afeard I am not o’ much account in guessing, especially as I was not there when she said it, and seeing that your mother was the only ‘ooman I ever cam’ into such close quarters as that with.”

“And what did mother say to you when you asked her?” said Dick musingly.

“I don’t see that that will help ‘ee.”

“The principle is the same.”

“Well — ay: what did she say? Let’s see. I was oiling my working-day boots without taking ‘em off, and wi’ my head hanging down, when she just brushed on by the garden hatch like a fluttering leaf. ‘Ann,’ I said, says I, and then, — but, Dick I’m afeard ‘twill be no help to thee; for we were such a rum couple, your mother and I, leastways one half was, that is myself — and your mother’s charms was more in the manner than the material.”

“Never mind! ‘Ann,’ said you.”

“‘Ann,’ said I, as I was saying . . . ‘Ann,’ I said to her when I was oiling my working-day boots wi’ my head hanging down, ‘Woot hae me?’ . . . What came next I can’t quite call up at this distance o’ time. Perhaps your mother would know, — she’s got a better memory for her little triumphs than I. However, the long and the short o’ the story is that we were married somehow, as I found afterwards. ‘Twas on White Tuesday, — Mellstock Club walked the same day, every man two and two, and a fine day ‘twas, — hot as fire, — how the sun did strike down upon my back going to church! I well can mind what a bath o’ sweating I was in, body and soul! But Fance will ha’ thee, Dick — she won’t walk with another chap — no such good luck.”

“I don’t know about that,” said Dick, whipping at Smart’s flank in a fanciful way, which, as Smart knew, meant nothing in connection with going on. “There’s Pa’son Maybold, too — that’s all against me.”

“What about he? She’s never been stuffing into thy innocent heart that he’s in hove with her? Lord, the vanity o’ maidens!”

“No, no. But he called, and she looked at him in such a way, and at me in such a way — quite different the ways were, — and as I was coming off, there was he hanging up her birdcage.”

“Well, why shouldn’t the man hang up her bird-cage? Turk seize it all, what’s that got to do wi’ it? Dick, that thou beest a white-lyvered chap I don’t say, but if thou beestn’t as mad as a cappel-faced bull, let me smile no more.”

“O, ay.”

“And what’s think now, Dick?”

“I don’t know.”

“Here’s another pretty kettle o’ fish for thee. Who d’ye think’s the bitter weed in our being turned out? Did our party tell ‘ee?”

“No. Why, Pa’son Maybold, I suppose.”

“Shiner, — because he’s in love with thy young woman, and d’want to see her young figure sitting up at that queer instrument, and her young fingers rum-strumming upon the keys.”

A sharp ado of sweet and bitter was going on in Dick during this communication from his father. “Shiner’s a fool! — no, that’s not it; I don’t believe any such thing, father. Why, Shiner would never take a bold step like that, unless she’d been a little made up to, and had taken it kindly. Pooh!”

“Who’s to say she didn’t?”

“I do.”

“The more fool you.”

“Why, father of me?”

“Has she ever done more to thee?”

“No.”

“Then she has done as much to he — rot ‘em! Now, Dick, this is how a maid is. She’ll swear she’s dying for thee, and she is dying for thee, and she will die for thee; but she’ll fling a look over t’other shoulder at another young feller, though never leaving off dying for thee just the same.”

“She’s not dying for me, and so she didn’t fling a look at him.”

“But she may be dying for him, for she looked at thee.”

“I don’t know what to make of it at all,” said Dick gloomily.

“All I can make of it is,” the tranter said, raising his whip, arranging his different joints and muscles, and motioning to the horse to move on, “that if you can’t read a maid’s mind by her motions, nature d’s seem to say thou’st ought to be a bachelor. Clk, clk! Smiler!” And the tranter moved on.

Dick held Smart’s rein firmly, and the whole concern of horse, cart, and man remained rooted in the lane. How long this condition would have lasted is unknown, had not Dick’s thoughts, after adding up numerous items of misery, gradually wandered round to the fact that as something must be done, it could not be done by staying there all night.

Reaching home he went up to his bedroom, shut the door as if he were going to be seen no more in this life, and taking a sheet of paper and uncorking the ink-bottle, he began a letter. The dignity of the writer’s mind was so powerfully apparent in every line of this effusion that it obscured the logical sequence of facts and intentions to an appreciable degree; and it was not at all clear to a reader whether he there and then left off loving Miss Fancy Day; whether he had never loved her seriously, and never meant to; whether he had been dying up to the present moment, and now intended to get well again; or whether he had hitherto been in good health, and intended to die for her forthwith.

He put this letter in an envelope, sealed it up, directed it in a stern handwriting of straight dashes — easy flourishes being rigorously excluded. He walked with it in his pocket down the lane in strides not an inch less than three feet long. Reaching her

gate he put on a resolute expression — then put it off again, turned back homeward, tore up his letter, and sat down.

That letter was altogether in a wrong tone — that he must own. A heartless man-of-the-world tone was what the juncture required. That he rather wanted her, and rather did not want her — the latter for choice; but that as a member of society he didn't mind making a query in jaunty terms, which could only be answered in the same way: did she mean anything by her bearing towards him, or did she not?

This letter was considered so satisfactory in every way that, being put into the hands of a little boy, and the order given that he was to run with it to the school, he was told in addition not to look behind him if Dick called after him to bring it back, but to run along with it just the same. Having taken this precaution against vacillation, Dick watched his messenger down the road, and turned into the house whistling an air in such ghastly jerks and starts, that whistling seemed to be the act the very furthest removed from that which was instinctive in such a youth.

The letter was left as ordered: the next morning came and passed — and no answer. The next. The next. Friday night came. Dick resolved that if no answer or sign were given by her the next day, on Sunday he would meet her face to face, and have it all out by word of mouth.

“Dick,” said his father, coming in from the garden at that moment — in each hand a hive of bees tied in a cloth to prevent their egress — ”I think you'd better take these two swarms of bees to Mrs. Maybold's to-morrow, instead o' me, and I'll go wi' Smiler and the wagon.”

It was a relief; for Mrs. Maybold, the vicar's mother, who had just taken into her head a fancy for keeping bees (pleasantly disguised under the pretence of its being an economical wish to produce her own honey), lived near the watering-place of Budmouth-Regis, ten miles off, and the business of transporting the hives thither would occupy the whole day, and to some extent annihilate the vacant time between this evening and the coming Sunday. The best spring-cart was washed throughout, the axles oiled, and the bees placed therein for the journey.

PART THE THIRD — SUMMER

CHAPTER I:

DRIVING OUT OF BUDMOUTH

An easy bend of neck and graceful set of head; full and wavy bundles of dark-brown hair; light fall of little feet; pretty devices on the skirt of the dress; clear deep eyes; in short, a bunch of sweets: it was Fancy! Dick's heart went round to her with a rush.

The scene was the corner of Mary Street in Budmouth-Regis, near the King's statue, at which point the white angle of the last house in the row cut perpendicularly an embayed and nearly motionless expanse of salt water projected from the outer ocean

— to-day lit in bright tones of green and opal. Dick and Smart had just emerged from the street, and there on the right, against the brilliant sheet of liquid colour, stood Fancy Day; and she turned and recognized him.

Dick suspended his thoughts of the letter and wonder at how she came there by driving close to the chains of the Esplanade — incontinently displacing two chairmen, who had just come to life for the summer in new clean shirts and revived clothes, and being almost displaced in turn by a rigid boy rattling along with a baker's cart, and looking neither to the right nor the left. He asked if she were going to Mellstock that night.

"Yes, I'm waiting for the carrier," she replied, seeming, too, to suspend thoughts of the letter.

"Now I can drive you home nicely, and you save half an hour. Will ye come with me?"

As Fancy's power to will anything seemed to have departed in some mysterious manner at that moment, Dick settled the matter by getting out and assisting her into the vehicle without another word.

The temporary flush upon her cheek changed to a lesser hue, which was permanent, and at length their eyes met; there was present between them a certain feeling of embarrassment, which arises at such moments when all the instinctive acts dictated by the position have been performed. Dick, being engaged with the reins, thought less of this awkwardness than did Fancy, who had nothing to do but to feel his presence, and to be more and more conscious of the fact, that by accepting a seat beside him in this way she succumbed to the tone of his note. Smart jogged along, and Dick jogged, and the helpless Fancy necessarily jogged, too; and she felt that she was in a measure captured and made a prisoner.

"I am so much obliged to you for your company, Miss Day," he observed, as they drove past the two semicircular bays of the Old Royal Hotel, where His Majesty King George the Third had many a time attended the balls of the burgesses.

To Miss Day, crediting him with the same consciousness of mastery — a consciousness of which he was perfectly innocent — this remark sounded like a magnanimous intention to soothe her, the captive.

"I didn't come for the pleasure of obliging you with my company," she said.

The answer had an unexpected manner of incivility in it that must have been rather surprising to young Dewy. At the same time it may be observed, that when a young woman returns a rude answer to a young man's civil remark, her heart is in a state which argues rather hopefully for his case than otherwise.

There was silence between them till they had left the sea-front and passed about twenty of the trees that ornamented the road leading up out of the town towards Casterbridge and Mellstock.

"Though I didn't come for that purpose either, I would have done it," said Dick at the twenty-first tree.

"Now, Mr. Dewy, no flirtation, because it's wrong, and I don't wish it."

Dick seated himself afresh just as he had been sitting before, arranged his looks very emphatically, and cleared his throat.

“Really, anybody would think you had met me on business and were just going to commence,” said the lady intractably.

“Yes, they would.”

“Why, you never have, to be sure!”

This was a shaky beginning. He chopped round, and said cheerily, as a man who had resolved never to spoil his jollity by loving one of womankind —

“Well, how are you getting on, Miss Day, at the present time? Gaily, I don’t doubt for a moment.”

“I am not gay, Dick; you know that.”

“Gaily doesn’t mean decked in gay dresses.”

“I didn’t suppose gaily was gaily dressed. Mighty me, what a scholar you’ve grown!”

“Lots of things have happened to you this spring, I see.”

“What have you seen?”

“O, nothing; I’ve heard, I mean!”

“What have you heard?”

“The name of a pretty man, with brass studs and a copper ring and a tin watch-chain, a little mixed up with your own. That’s all.”

“That’s a very unkind picture of Mr. Shiner, for that’s who you mean! The studs are gold, as you know, and it’s a real silver chain; the ring I can’t conscientiously defend, and he only wore it once.”

“He might have worn it a hundred times without showing it half so much.”

“Well, he’s nothing to me,” she serenely observed.

“Not any more than I am?”

“Now, Mr. Dewy,” said Fancy severely, “certainly he isn’t any more to me than you are!”

“Not so much?”

She looked aside to consider the precise compass of that question. “That I can’t exactly answer,” she replied with soft archness.

As they were going rather slowly, another spring-cart, containing a farmer, farmer’s wife, and farmer’s man, jogged past them; and the farmer’s wife and farmer’s man eyed the couple very curiously. The farmer never looked up from the horse’s tail.

“Why can’t you exactly answer?” said Dick, quickening Smart a little, and jogging on just behind the farmer and farmer’s wife and man.

As no answer came, and as their eyes had nothing else to do, they both contemplated the picture presented in front, and noticed how the farmer’s wife sat flattened between the two men, who bulged over each end of the seat to give her room, till they almost sat upon their respective wheels; and they looked too at the farmer’s wife’s silk mantle, inflating itself between her shoulders like a balloon and sinking flat again, at each jog of the horse. The farmer’s wife, feeling their eyes sticking into her back, looked over her shoulder. Dick dropped ten yards further behind.

"Fancy, why can't you answer?" he repeated.

"Because how much you are to me depends upon how much I am to you," said she in low tones.

"Everything," said Dick, putting his hand towards hers, and casting emphatic eyes upon the upper curve of her cheek.

"Now, Richard Dewy, no touching me! I didn't say in what way your thinking of me affected the question — perhaps inversely, don't you see? No touching, sir! Look; goodness me, don't, Dick!"

The cause of her sudden start was the unpleasant appearance over Dick's right shoulder of an empty timber-wagon and four journeymen-carpenters reclining in lazy postures inside it, their eyes directed upwards at various oblique angles into the surrounding world, the chief object of their existence being apparently to criticize to the very backbone and marrow every animate object that came within the compass of their vision. This difficulty of Dick's was overcome by trotting on till the wagon and carpenters were beginning to look rather misty by reason of a film of dust that accompanied their wagon-wheels, and rose around their heads like a fog.

"Say you love me, Fancy."

"No, Dick, certainly not; 'tisn't time to do that yet."

"Why, Fancy?"

"'Miss Day' is better at present — don't mind my saying so; and I ought not to have called you Dick."

"Nonsense! when you know that I would do anything on earth for your love. Why, you make any one think that loving is a thing that can be done and undone, and put on and put off at a mere whim."

"No, no, I don't," she said gently; "but there are things which tell me I ought not to give way to much thinking about you, even if —"

"But you want to, don't you? Yes, say you do; it is best to be truthful. Whatever they may say about a woman's right to conceal where her love lies, and pretend it doesn't exist, and things like that, it is not best; I do know it, Fancy. And an honest woman in that, as well as in all her daily concerns, shines most brightly, and is thought most of in the long-run."

"Well then, perhaps, Dick, I do love you a little," she whispered tenderly; "but I wish you wouldn't say any more now."

"I won't say any more now, then, if you don't like it, dear. But you do love me a little, don't you?"

"Now you ought not to want me to keep saying things twice; I can't say any more now, and you must be content with what you have."

"I may at any rate call you Fancy? There's no harm in that."

"Yes, you may."

"And you'll not call me Mr. Dewy any more?"

"Very well."

CHAPTER II:

FURTHER ALONG THE ROAD

Dick's spirits having risen in the course of these admissions of his sweetheart, he now touched Smart with the whip; and on Smart's neck, not far behind his ears. Smart, who had been lost in thought for some time, never dreaming that Dick could reach so far with a whip which, on this particular journey, had never been extended further than his flank, tossed his head, and scampered along with exceeding briskness, which was very pleasant to the young couple behind him till, turning a bend in the road, they came instantly upon the farmer, farmer's man, and farmer's wife with the flapping mantle, all jogging on just the same as ever.

"Bother those people! Here we are upon them again."

"Well, of course. They have as much right to the road as we."

"Yes, but it is provoking to be overlooked so. I like a road all to myself. Look what a lumbering affair theirs is!" The wheels of the farmer's cart, just at that moment, jogged into a depression running across the road, giving the cart a twist, whereupon all three nodded to the left, and on coming out of it all three nodded to the right, and went on jerking their backs in and out as usual. "We'll pass them when the road gets wider."

When an opportunity seemed to offer itself for carrying this intention into effect, they heard light flying wheels behind, and on their quartering there whizzed along past them a brand-new gig, so brightly polished that the spokes of the wheels sent forth a continual quivering light at one point in their circle, and all the panels glared like mirrors in Dick and Fancy's eyes. The driver, and owner as it appeared, was really a handsome man; his companion was Shiner. Both turned round as they passed Dick and Fancy, and stared with bold admiration in her face till they were obliged to attend to the operation of passing the farmer. Dick glanced for an instant at Fancy while she was undergoing their scrutiny; then returned to his driving with rather a sad countenance.

"Why are you so silent?" she said, after a while, with real concern.

"Nothing."

"Yes, it is, Dick. I couldn't help those people passing."

"I know that."

"You look offended with me. What have I done?"

"I can't tell without offending you."

"Better out."

"Well," said Dick, who seemed longing to tell, even at the risk of offending her, "I was thinking how different you in love are from me in love. Whilst those men were staring, you dismissed me from your thoughts altogether, and —"

"You can't offend me further now; tell all!"

"And showed upon your face a pleased sense of being attractive to 'em."

"Don't be silly, Dick! You know very well I didn't."

Dick shook his head sceptically, and smiled.

“Dick, I always believe flattery if possible — and it was possible then. Now there’s an open confession of weakness. But I showed no consciousness of it.”

Dick, perceiving by her look that she would adhere to her statement, charitably forbore saying anything that could make her prevaricate. The sight of Shiner, too, had recalled another branch of the subject to his mind; that which had been his greatest trouble till her company and words had obscured its probability.

“By the way, Fancy, do you know why our quire is to be dismissed?”

“No: except that it is Mr. Maybold’s wish for me to play the organ.”

“Do you know how it came to be his wish?”

“That I don’t.”

“Mr. Shiner, being churchwarden, has persuaded the vicar; who, however, was willing enough before. Shiner, I know, is crazy to see you playing every Sunday; I suppose he’ll turn over your music, for the organ will be close to his pew. But — I know you have never encouraged him?”

“Never once!” said Fancy emphatically, and with eyes full of earnest truth. “I don’t like him indeed, and I never heard of his doing this before! I have always felt that I should like to play in a church, but I never wished to turn you and your choir out; and I never even said that I could play till I was asked. You don’t think for a moment that I did, surely, do you?”

“I know you didn’t, dear.”

“Or that I care the least morsel of a bit for him?”

“I know you don’t.”

The distance between Budmouth and Mellstock was ten or eleven miles, and there being a good inn, ‘The Ship,’ four miles out of Budmouth, with a mast and cross-trees in front, Dick’s custom in driving thither was to divide the journey into three stages by resting at this inn going and coming, and not troubling the Budmouth stables at all, whenever his visit to the town was a mere call and deposit, as to-day.

Fancy was ushered into a little tea-room, and Dick went to the stables to see to the feeding of Smart. In face of the significant twitches of feature that were visible in the ostler and labouring men idling around, Dick endeavoured to look unconscious of the fact that there was any sentiment between him and Fancy beyond a tranter’s desire to carry a passenger home. He presently entered the inn and opened the door of Fancy’s room.

“Dick, do you know, it has struck me that it is rather awkward, my being here alone with you like this. I don’t think you had better come in with me.”

“That’s rather unpleasant, dear.”

“Yes, it is, and I wanted you to have some tea as well as myself too, because you must be tired.”

“Well, let me have some with you, then. I was denied once before, if you recollect, Fancy.”

“Yes, yes, never mind! And it seems unfriendly of me now, but I don’t know what to do.”

"It shall be as you say, then." Dick began to retreat with a dissatisfied wrinkling of face, and a farewell glance at the cosy tea-tray.

"But you don't see how it is, Dick, when you speak like that," she said, with more earnestness than she had ever shown before. "You do know, that even if I care very much for you, I must remember that I have a difficult position to maintain. The vicar would not like me, as his schoolmistress, to indulge in a tête-à-tête anywhere with anybody."

"But I am not any body!" exclaimed Dick.

"No, no, I mean with a young man;" and she added softly, "unless I were really engaged to be married to him."

"Is that all? Then, dearest, dearest, why we'll be engaged at once, to be sure we will, and down I sit! There it is, as easy as a glove!"

"Ah! but suppose I won't! And, goodness me, what have I done!" she faltered, getting very red. "Positively, it seems as if I meant you to say that!"

"Let's do it! I mean get engaged," said Dick. "Now, Fancy, will you be my wife?"

"Do you know, Dick, it was rather unkind of you to say what you did coming along the road," she remarked, as if she had not heard the latter part of his speech; though an acute observer might have noticed about her breast, as the word 'wife' fell from Dick's lips, a soft silent escape of breaths, with very short rests between each.

"What did I say?"

"About my trying to look attractive to those men in the gig."

"You couldn't help looking so, whether you tried or no. And, Fancy, you do care for me?"

"Yes."

"Very much?"

"Yes."

"And you'll be my own wife?"

Her heart quickened, adding to and withdrawing from her cheek varying tones of red to match each varying thought. Dick looked expectantly at the ripe tint of her delicate mouth, waiting for what was coming forth.

"Yes — if father will let me."

Dick drew himself close to her, compressing his lips and pouting them out, as if he were about to whistle the softest melody known.

"O no!" said Fancy solemnly.

The modest Dick drew back a little.

"Dick, Dick, kiss me and let me go instantly! — here's somebody coming!" she whisperingly exclaimed.

* * *

Half an hour afterwards Dick emerged from the inn, and if Fancy's lips had been real cherries probably Dick's would have appeared deeply stained. The landlord was standing in the yard.

“Heu-heu! hay-hay, Master Dewy! Ho-ho!” he laughed, letting the laugh slip out gently and by degrees that it might make little noise in its exit, and smiting Dick under the fifth rib at the same time. “This will never do, upon my life, Master Dewy! calling for tay for a feymel passenger, and then going in and sitting down and having some too, and biding such a fine long time!”

“But surely you know?” said Dick, with great apparent surprise. “Yes, yes! Ha-ha!” smiting the landlord under the ribs in return.

“Why, what? Yes, yes; ha-ha!”

“You know, of course!”

“Yes, of course! But — that is — I don’t.”

“Why about — between that young lady and me?” nodding to the window of the room that Fancy occupied.

“No; not I!” said the innkeeper, bringing his eyes into circles.

“And you don’t!”

“Not a word, I’ll take my oath!”

“But you laughed when I laughed.”

“Ay, that was me sympathy; so did you when I laughed!”

“Really, you don’t know? Goodness — not knowing that!”

“I’ll take my oath I don’t!”

“O yes,” said Dick, with frigid rhetoric of pitying astonishment, “we’re engaged to be married, you see, and I naturally look after her.”

“Of course, of course! I didn’t know that, and I hope ye’ll excuse any little freedom of mine, Mr. Dewy. But it is a very odd thing; I was talking to your father very intimate about family matters only last Friday in the world, and who should come in but Keeper Day, and we all then fell a-talking o’ family matters; but neither one o’ them said a mortal word about it; knowen me too so many years, and I at your father’s own wedding. ‘Tisn’t what I should have expected from an old neighbour!”

“Well, to say the truth, we hadn’t told father of the engagement at that time; in fact, ‘twasn’t settled.”

“Ah! the business was done Sunday. Yes, yes, Sunday’s the courting day. Heu-heu!”

“No, ‘twasn’t done Sunday in particular.”

“After school-hours this week? Well, a very good time, a very proper good time.”

“O no, ‘twasn’t done then.”

“Coming along the road to-day then, I suppose?”

“Not at all; I wouldn’t think of getting engaged in a dog-cart.”

“Dammy — might as well have said at once, the when be blowed! Anyhow, ‘tis a fine day, and I hope next time you’ll come as one.”

Fancy was duly brought out and assisted into the vehicle, and the newly affianced youth and maiden passed up the steep hill to the Ridgeway, and vanished in the direction of Mellstock.

CHAPTER III:

A CONFESSION

It was a morning of the latter summer-time; a morning of lingering dews, when the grass is never dry in the shade. Fuchsias and dahlias were laden till eleven o'clock with small drops and dashes of water, changing the colour of their sparkle at every movement of the air; and elsewhere hanging on twigs like small silver fruit. The threads of garden spiders appeared thick and polished. In the dry and sunny places, dozens of long-legged crane-flies whizzed off the grass at every step the passer took.

Fancy Day and her friend Susan Dewy the tranter's daughter, were in such a spot as this, pulling down a bough laden with early apples. Three months had elapsed since Dick and Fancy had journeyed together from Budmouth, and the course of their love had run on vigorously during the whole time. There had been just enough difficulty attending its development, and just enough finesse required in keeping it private, to lend the passion an ever-increasing freshness on Fancy's part, whilst, whether from these accessories or not, Dick's heart had been at all times as fond as could be desired. But there was a cloud on Fancy's horizon now.

"She is so well off — better than any of us," Susan Dewy was saying. "Her father farms five hundred acres, and she might marry a doctor or curate or anything of that kind if she contrived a little."

"I don't think Dick ought to have gone to that gipsy-party at all when he knew I couldn't go," replied Fancy uneasily.

"He didn't know that you would not be there till it was too late to refuse the invitation," said Susan.

"And what was she like? Tell me."

"Well, she was rather pretty, I must own."

"Tell straight on about her, can't you! Come, do, Susan. How many times did you say he danced with her?"

"Once."

"Twice, I think you said?"

"Indeed I'm sure I didn't."

"Well, and he wanted to again, I expect."

"No; I don't think he did. She wanted to dance with him again bad enough, I know. Everybody does with Dick, because he's so handsome and such a clever courter."

"O, I wish! — How did you say she wore her hair?"

"In long curls, — and her hair is light, and it curls without being put in paper: that's how it is she's so attractive."

"She's trying to get him away! yes, yes, she is! And through keeping this miserable school I mustn't wear my hair in curls! But I will; I don't care if I leave the school and go home, I will wear my curls! Look, Susan, do! is her hair as soft and long as this?" Fancy pulled from its coil under her hat a twine of her own hair, and stretched it down her shoulder to show its length, looking at Susan to catch her opinion from her eyes.

"It is about the same length as that, I think," said Miss Dewy.

Fancy paused hopelessly. "I wish mine was lighter, like hers!" she continued mournfully. "But hers isn't so soft, is it? Tell me, now."

"I don't know."

Fancy abstractedly extended her vision to survey a yellow butterfly and a red-and-black butterfly that were flitting along in company, and then became aware that Dick was advancing up the garden.

"Susan, here's Dick coming; I suppose that's because we've been talking about him."

"Well, then, I shall go indoors now — you won't want me;" and Susan turned practically and walked off.

Enter the single-minded Dick, whose only fault at the gipsying, or picnic, had been that of loving Fancy too exclusively, and depriving himself of the innocent pleasure the gathering might have afforded him, by sighing regretfully at her absence, — who had danced with the rival in sheer despair of ever being able to get through that stale, flat, and unprofitable afternoon in any other way; but this she would not believe.

Fancy had settled her plan of emotion. To reproach Dick? O no, no. "I am in great trouble," said she, taking what was intended to be a hopelessly melancholy survey of a few small apples lying under the tree; yet a critical ear might have noticed in her voice a tentative tone as to the effect of the words upon Dick when she uttered them.

"What are you in trouble about? Tell me of it," said Dick earnestly. "Darling, I will share it with 'ee and help 'ee."

"No, no: you can't! Nobody can!"

"Why not? You don't deserve it, whatever it is. Tell me, dear."

"O, it isn't what you think! It is dreadful: my own sin!"

"Sin, Fancy! as if you could sin! I know it can't be."

"'Tis, 'tis!" said the young lady, in a pretty little frenzy of sorrow. "I have done wrong, and I don't like to tell it! Nobody will forgive me, nobody! and you above all will not! . . . I have allowed myself to — to — fl —"

"What, — not flirt!" he said, controlling his emotion as it were by a sudden pressure inward from his surface. "And you said only the day before yesterday that you hadn't flirted in your life!"

"Yes, I did; and that was a wicked story! I have let another love me, and —"

"Good G — ! Well, I'll forgive you, — yes, if you couldn't help it, — yes, I will!" said the now dismal Dick. "Did you encourage him?"

"O, — I don't know, — yes — no. O, I think so!"

"Who was it?" A pause. "Tell me!"

"Mr. Shiner."

After a silence that was only disturbed by the fall of an apple, a long-checked sigh from Dick, and a sob from Fancy, he said with real austerity —

"Tell it all; — every word!"

"He looked at me, and I looked at him, and he said, 'Will you let me show you how to catch bullfinches down here by the stream?' And I — wanted to know very much

— I did so long to have a bullfinch! I couldn't help that and I said, 'Yes!' and then he said, 'Come here.' And I went with him down to the lovely river, and then he said to me, 'Look and see how I do it, and then you'll know: I put this birdlime round this twig, and then I go here,' he said, 'and hide away under a bush; and presently clever Mister Bird comes and perches upon the twig, and flaps his wings, and you've got him before you can say Jack' — something; O, O, O, I forget what!"

"Jack Sprat," mournfully suggested Dick through the cloud of his misery.

"No, not Jack Sprat," she sobbed.

"Then 'twas Jack Robinson!" he said, with the emphasis of a man who had resolved to discover every iota of the truth, or die.

"Yes, that was it! And then I put my hand upon the rail of the bridge to get across, and — That's all."

"Well, that isn't much, either," said Dick critically, and more cheerfully. "Not that I see what business Shiner has to take upon himself to teach you anything. But it seems — it do seem there must have been more than that to set you up in such a dreadful taking?"

He looked into Fancy's eyes. Misery of miseries! — guilt was written there still.

"Now, Fancy, you've not told me all!" said Dick, rather sternly for a quiet young man.

"O, don't speak so cruelly! I am afraid to tell now! If you hadn't been harsh, I was going on to tell all; now I can't!"

"Come, dear Fancy, tell: come. I'll forgive; I must, — by heaven and earth, I must, whether I will or no; I love you so!"

"Well, when I put my hand on the bridge, he touched it — "

"A scamp!" said Dick, grinding an imaginary human frame to powder.

"And then he looked at me, and at last he said, 'Are you in love with Dick Dewy?' And I said, 'Perhaps I am!' and then he said, 'I wish you weren't then, for I want to marry you, with all my soul.'"

"There's a villain now! Want to marry you!" And Dick quivered with the bitterness of satirical laughter. Then suddenly remembering that he might be reckoning without his host: "Unless, to be sure, you are willing to have him, — perhaps you are," he said, with the wretched indifference of a castaway.

"No, indeed I am not!" she said, her sobs just beginning to take a favourable turn towards cure.

"Well, then," said Dick, coming a little to his senses, "you've been stretching it very much in giving such a dreadful beginning to such a mere nothing. And I know what you've done it for, — just because of that gipsy-party!" He turned away from her and took five paces decisively, as if he were tired of an ungrateful country, including herself. "You did it to make me jealous, and I won't stand it!" He flung the words to her over his shoulder and then stalked on, apparently very anxious to walk to the remotest of the Colonies that very minute.

“O, O, O, Dick — Dick!” she cried, trotting after him like a pet lamb, and really seriously alarmed at last, “you’ll kill me! My impulses are bad — miserably wicked, — and I can’t help it; forgive me, Dick! And I love you always; and those times when you look silly and don’t seem quite good enough for me, — just the same, I do, Dick! And there is something more serious, though not concerning that walk with him.”

“Well, what is it?” said Dick, altering his mind about walking to the Colonies; in fact, passing to the other extreme, and standing so rooted to the road that he was apparently not even going home.

“Why this,” she said, drying the beginning of a new flood of tears she had been going to shed, “this is the serious part. Father has told Mr. Shiner that he would like him for a son-in-law, if he could get me; — that he has his right hearty consent to come courting me!”

CHAPTER IV:

AN ARRANGEMENT

“That is serious,” said Dick, more intellectually than he had spoken for a long time.

The truth was that Geoffrey knew nothing about his daughter’s continued walks and meetings with Dick. When a hint that there were symptoms of an attachment between them had first reached Geoffrey’s ears, he stated so emphatically that he must think the matter over before any such thing could be allowed that, rather unwisely on Dick’s part, whatever it might have been on the lady’s, the lovers were careful to be seen together no more in public; and Geoffrey, forgetting the report, did not think over the matter at all. So Mr. Shiner resumed his old position in Geoffrey’s brain by mere flux of time. Even Shiner began to believe that Dick existed for Fancy no more, — though that remarkably easy-going man had taken no active steps on his own account as yet.

“And father has not only told Mr. Shiner that,” continued Fancy, “but he has written me a letter, to say he should wish me to encourage Mr. Shiner, if ‘twas convenient!”

“I must start off and see your father at once!” said Dick, taking two or three vehement steps to the south, recollecting that Mr. Day lived to the north, and coming back again.

“I think we had better see him together. Not tell him what you come for, or anything of the kind, until he likes you, and so win his brain through his heart, which is always the way to manage people. I mean in this way: I am going home on Saturday week to help them in the honey-taking. You might come there to me, have something to eat and drink, and let him guess what your coming signifies, without saying it in so many words.”

“We’ll do it, dearest. But I shall ask him for you, flat and plain; not wait for his guessing.” And the lover then stepped close to her, and attempted to give her one little kiss on the cheek, his lips alighting, however, on an outlying tract of her back hair by reason of an impulse that had caused her to turn her head with a jerk. “Yes, and I’ll put on my second-best suit and a clean shirt and collar, and black my boots as

if 'twas a Sunday. 'Twill have a good appearance, you see, and that's a great deal to start with."

"You won't wear that old waistcoat, will you, Dick?"

"Bless you, no! Why I — "

"I didn't mean to be personal, dear Dick," she said, fearing she had hurt his feelings. "'Tis a very nice waistcoat, but what I meant was, that though it is an excellent waistcoat for a settled-down man, it is not quite one for" (she waited, and a blush expanded over her face, and then she went on again) — "for going courting in."

"No, I'll wear my best winter one, with the leather lining, that mother made. It is a beautiful, handsome waistcoat inside, yes, as ever anybody saw. In fact, only the other day, I unbuttoned it to show a chap that very lining, and he said it was the strongest, handsomest lining you could wish to see on the king's waistcoat himself."

"I don't quite know what to wear," she said, as if her habitual indifference alone to dress had kept back so important a subject till now.

"Why, that blue frock you wore last week."

"Doesn't set well round the neck. I couldn't wear that."

"But I shan't care."

"No, you won't mind."

"Well, then it's all right. Because you only care how you look to me, do you, dear? I only dress for you, that's certain."

"Yes, but you see I couldn't appear in it again very well."

"Any strange gentleman you mid meet in your journey might notice the set of it, I suppose. Fancy, men in love don't think so much about how they look to other women." It is difficult to say whether a tone of playful banter or of gentle reproach prevailed in the speech.

"Well then, Dick," she said, with good-humoured frankness, "I'll own it. I shouldn't like a stranger to see me dressed badly, even though I am in love. 'Tis our nature, I suppose."

"You perfect woman!"

"Yes; if you lay the stress on 'woman,'" she murmured, looking at a group of hollyhocks in flower, round which a crowd of butterflies had gathered like female idlers round a bonnet-shop.

"But about the dress. Why not wear the one you wore at our party?"

"That sets well, but a girl of the name of Bet Tallor, who lives near our house, has had one made almost like it (only in pattern, though of miserably cheap stuff), and I couldn't wear it on that account. Dear me, I am afraid I can't go now."

"O yes, you must; I know you will!" said Dick, with dismay. "Why not wear what you've got on?"

"What! this old one! After all, I think that by wearing my gray one Saturday, I can make the blue one do for Sunday. Yes, I will. A hat or a bonnet, which shall it be? Which do I look best in?"

"Well, I think the bonnet is nicest, more quiet and matronly."

“What’s the objection to the hat? Does it make me look old?”

“O no; the hat is well enough; but it makes you look rather too — you won’t mind me saying it, dear?”

“Not at all, for I shall wear the bonnet.”

“ — Rather too coquettish and flirty for an engaged young woman.”

She reflected a minute. “Yes; yes. Still, after all, the hat would do best; hats are best, you see. Yes, I must wear the hat, dear Dicky, because I ought to wear a hat, you know.”

PART THE FOURTH — AUTUMN

CHAPTER I:

GOING NUTTING

Dick, dressed in his ‘second-best’ suit, burst into Fancy’s sitting-room with a glow of pleasure on his face.

It was two o’clock on Friday, the day before her contemplated visit to her father, and for some reason connected with cleaning the school the children had been given this Friday afternoon for pastime, in addition to the usual Saturday.

“Fancy! it happens just right that it is a leisure half day with you. Smart is lame in his near-foot-afore, and so, as I can’t do anything, I’ve made a holiday afternoon of it, and am come for you to go nutting with me!”

She was sitting by the parlour window, with a blue frock lying across her lap and scissors in her hand.

“Go nutting! Yes. But I’m afraid I can’t go for an hour or so.”

“Why not? ‘Tis the only spare afternoon we may both have together for weeks.”

“This dress of mine, that I am going to wear on Sunday at Yalbury; — I find it fits so badly that I must alter it a little, after all. I told the dressmaker to make it by a pattern I gave her at the time; instead of that, she did it her own way, and made me look a perfect fright.”

“How long will you be?” he inquired, looking rather disappointed.

“Not long. Do wait and talk to me; come, do, dear.”

Dick sat down. The talking progressed very favourably, amid the snipping and sewing, till about half-past two, at which time his conversation began to be varied by a slight tapping upon his toe with a walking-stick he had cut from the hedge as he came along. Fancy talked and answered him, but sometimes the answers were so negligently given, that it was evident her thoughts lay for the greater part in her lap with the blue dress.

The clock struck three. Dick arose from his seat, walked round the room with his hands behind him, examined all the furniture, then sounded a few notes on the

harmonium, then looked inside all the books he could find, then smoothed Fancy's head with his hand. Still the snipping and sewing went on.

The clock struck four. Dick fidgeted about, yawned privately; counted the knots in the table, yawned publicly; counted the flies on the ceiling, yawned horribly; went into the kitchen and scullery, and so thoroughly studied the principle upon which the pump was constructed that he could have delivered a lecture on the subject. Stepping back to Fancy, and finding still that she had not done, he went into her garden and looked at her cabbages and potatoes, and reminded himself that they seemed to him to wear a decidedly feminine aspect; then pulled up several weeds, and came in again. The clock struck five, and still the snipping and sewing went on.

Dick attempted to kill a fly, peeled all the rind off his walking-stick, then threw the stick into the scullery because it was spoilt, produced hideous discords from the harmonium, and accidentally overturned a vase of flowers, the water from which ran in a rill across the table and dribbled to the floor, where it formed a lake, the shape of which, after the lapse of a few minutes, he began to modify considerably with his foot, till it was like a map of England and Wales.

"Well, Dick, you needn't have made quite such a mess."

"Well, I needn't, I suppose." He walked up to the blue dress, and looked at it with a rigid gaze. Then an idea seemed to cross his brain.

"Fancy."

"Yes."

"I thought you said you were going to wear your gray gown all day to-morrow on your trip to Yalbury, and in the evening too, when I shall be with you, and ask your father for you?"

"So I am."

"And the blue one only on Sunday?"

"And the blue one Sunday."

"Well, dear, I sha'n't be at Yalbury Sunday to see it."

"No, but I shall walk to Longpuddle church in the afternoon with father, and such lots of people will be looking at me there, you know; and it did set so badly round the neck."

"I never noticed it, and 'tis like nobody else would."

"They might."

"Then why not wear the gray one on Sunday as well? 'Tis as pretty as the blue one."

"I might make the gray one do, certainly. But it isn't so good; it didn't cost half so much as this one, and besides, it would be the same I wore Saturday."

"Then wear the striped one, dear."

"I might."

"Or the dark one."

"Yes, I might; but I want to wear a fresh one they haven't seen."

"I see, I see," said Dick, in a voice in which the tones of love were decidedly inconvenienced by a considerable emphasis, his thoughts meanwhile running as follows:

“I, the man she loves best in the world, as she says, am to understand that my poor half-holiday is to be lost, because she wants to wear on Sunday a gown there is not the slightest necessity for wearing, simply, in fact, to appear more striking than usual in the eyes of Longpuddle young men; and I not there, either.”

“Then there are three dresses good enough for my eyes, but neither is good enough for the youths of Longpuddle,” he said.

“No, not that exactly, Dick. Still, you see, I do want — to look pretty to them — there, that’s honest! But I sha’n’t be much longer.”

“How much?”

“A quarter of an hour.”

“Very well; I’ll come in in a quarter of an hour.”

“Why go away?”

“I mid as well.”

He went out, walked down the road, and sat upon a gate. Here he meditated and meditated, and the more he meditated the more decidedly did he begin to fume, and the more positive was he that his time had been scandalously trifled with by Miss Fancy Day — that, so far from being the simple girl who had never had a sweetheart before, as she had solemnly assured him time after time, she was, if not a flirt, a woman who had had no end of admirers; a girl most certainly too anxious about her frocks; a girl, whose feelings, though warm, were not deep; a girl who cared a great deal too much how she appeared in the eyes of other men. “What she loves best in the world,” he thought, with an incipient spice of his father’s grimness, “is her hair and complexion. What she loves next best, her gowns and hats; what she loves next best, myself, perhaps!”

Suffering great anguish at this disloyalty in himself and harshness to his darling, yet disposed to persevere in it, a horribly cruel thought crossed his mind. He would not call for her, as he had promised, at the end of a quarter of an hour! Yes, it would be a punishment she well deserved. Although the best part of the afternoon had been wasted he would go nutting as he had intended, and go by himself.

He leaped over the gate, and pushed up the lane for nearly two miles, till a winding path called Snail-Creep sloped up a hill and entered a hazel copse by a hole like a rabbit’s burrow. In he plunged, vanished among the bushes, and in a short time there was no sign of his existence upon earth, save an occasional rustling of boughs and snapping of twigs in divers points of Grey’s Wood.

Never man nutted as Dick nutted that afternoon. He worked like a galley slave. Half-hour after half-hour passed away, and still he gathered without ceasing. At last, when the sun had set, and bunches of nuts could not be distinguished from the leaves which nourished them, he shouldered his bag, containing quite two pecks of the finest produce of the wood, about as much use to him as two pecks of stones from the road, strolled down the woodland track, crossed the highway and entered the homeward lane, whistling as he went.

Probably, Miss Fancy Day never before or after stood so low in Mr. Dewy's opinion as on that afternoon. In fact, it is just possible that a few more blue dresses on the Longpuddle young men's account would have clarified Dick's brain entirely, and made him once more a free man.

But Venus had planned other developments, at any rate for the present. Cuckoo-Lane, the way he pursued, passed over a ridge which rose keenly against the sky about fifty yards in his van. Here, upon the bright after-glow about the horizon, was now visible an irregular shape, which at first he conceived to be a bough standing a little beyond the line of its neighbours. Then it seemed to move, and, as he advanced still further, there was no doubt that it was a living being sitting in the bank, head bowed on hand. The grassy margin entirely prevented his footsteps from being heard, and it was not till he was close that the figure recognized him. Up it sprang, and he was face to face with Fancy.

"Dick, Dick! O, is it you, Dick!"

"Yes, Fancy," said Dick, in a rather repentant tone, and lowering his nuts.

She ran up to him, flung her parasol on the grass, put her little head against his breast, and then there began a narrative, disjointed by such a hysterical weeping as was never surpassed for intensity in the whole history of love.

"O Dick," she sobbed out, "where have you been away from me? O, I have suffered agony, and thought you would never come any more! 'Tis cruel, Dick; no 't isn't, it is justice! I've been walking miles and miles up and down Grey's Wood, trying to find you, till I was wearied and worn out, and I could walk no further, and had come back this far! O Dick, directly you were gone, I thought I had offended you and I put down the dress; 't isn't finished now, and I never will finish, it, and I'll wear an old one Sunday! Yes, Dick, I will, because I don't care what I wear when you are not by my side — ha, you think I do, but I don't! — and I ran after you, and I saw you go up Snail-Creep and not look back once, and then you plunged in, and I after you; but I was too far behind. O, I did wish the horrid bushes had been cut down, so that I could see your dear shape again! And then I called out to you, and nobody answered, and I was afraid to call very loud, lest anybody else should hear me. Then I kept wandering and wandering about, and it was dreadful misery, Dick. And then I shut my eyes and fell to picturing you looking at some other woman, very pretty and nice, but with no affection or truth in her at all, and then imagined you saying to yourself, 'Ah, she's as good as Fancy, for Fancy told me a story, and was a flirt, and cared for herself more than me, so now I'll have this one for my sweetheart.' O, you won't, will you, Dick, for I do love you so!"

It is scarcely necessary to add that Dick renounced his freedom there and then, and kissed her ten times over, and promised that no pretty woman of the kind alluded to should ever engross his thoughts; in short, that though he had been vexed with her, all such vexation was past, and that henceforth and for ever it was simply Fancy or death for him. And then they set about proceeding homewards, very slowly on account of Fancy's weariness, she leaning upon his shoulder, and in addition receiving support

from his arm round her waist; though she had sufficiently recovered from her desperate condition to sing to him, 'Why are you wandering here, I pray?' during the latter part of their walk. Nor is it necessary to describe in detail how the bag of nuts was quite forgotten until three days later, when it was found among the brambles and restored empty to Mrs. Dewy, her initials being marked thereon in red cotton; and how she puzzled herself till her head ached upon the question of how on earth her meal-bag could have got into Cuckoo-Lane.

CHAPTER II:

HONEY-TAKING, AND AFTERWARDS

Saturday evening saw Dick Dewy journeying on foot to Yalbury Wood, according to the arrangement with Fancy.

The landscape being concave, at the going down of the sun everything suddenly assumed a uniform robe of shade. The evening advanced from sunset to dusk long before Dick's arrival, and his progress during the latter portion of his walk through the trees was indicated by the flutter of terrified birds that had been roosting over the path. And in crossing the glades, masses of hot dry air, that had been formed on the hills during the day, greeted his cheeks alternately with clouds of damp night air from the valleys. He reached the keeper-steward's house, where the grass-plot and the garden in front appeared light and pale against the unbroken darkness of the grove from which he had emerged, and paused at the garden gate.

He had scarcely been there a minute when he beheld a sort of procession advancing from the door in his front. It consisted first of Enoch the trapper, carrying a spade on his shoulder and a lantern dangling in his hand; then came Mrs. Day, the light of the lantern revealing that she bore in her arms curious objects about a foot long, in the form of Latin crosses (made of lath and brown paper dipped in brimstone — called matches by bee-masters); next came Miss Day, with a shawl thrown over her head; and behind all, in the gloom, Mr. Frederic Shiner.

Dick, in his consternation at finding Shiner present, was at a loss how to proceed, and retired under a tree to collect his thoughts.

"Here I be, Enoch," said a voice; and the procession advancing farther, the lantern's rays illuminated the figure of Geoffrey, awaiting their arrival beside a row of bee-hives, in front of the path. Taking the spade from Enoch, he proceeded to dig two holes in the earth beside the hives, the others standing round in a circle, except Mrs. Day, who deposited her matches in the fork of an apple-tree and returned to the house. The party remaining were now lit up in front by the lantern in their midst, their shadows radiating each way upon the garden-plot like the spokes of a wheel. An apparent embarrassment of Fancy at the presence of Shiner caused a silence in the assembly, during which the preliminaries of execution were arranged, the matches fixed, the stake kindled, the two

hives placed over the two holes, and the earth stopped round the edges. Geoffrey then stood erect, and rather more, to straighten his backbone after the digging.

"They were a peculiar family," said Mr. Shiner, regarding the hives reflectively.

Geoffrey nodded.

"Those holes will be the grave of thousands!" said Fancy. "I think 'tis rather a cruel thing to do."

Her father shook his head. "No," he said, tapping the hives to shake the dead bees from their cells, "if you suffocate 'em this way, they only die once: if you fumigate 'em in the new way, they come to life again, and die o' starvation; so the pangs o' death be twice upon 'em."

"I incline to Fancy's notion," said Mr. Shiner, laughing lightly.

"The proper way to take honey, so that the bees be neither starved nor murdered, is a puzzling matter," said the keeper steadily.

"I should like never to take it from them," said Fancy.

"But 'tis the money," said Enoch musingly. "For without money man is a shadder!"

The lantern-light had disturbed many bees that had escaped from hives destroyed some days earlier, and, demoralised by affliction, were now getting a living as marauders about the doors of other hives. Several flew round the head and neck of Geoffrey; then darted upon him with an irritated bizz.

Enoch threw down the lantern, and ran off and pushed his head into a currant bush; Fancy scudded up the path; and Mr. Shiner floundered away helter-skelter among the cabbages. Geoffrey stood his ground, unmoved and firm as a rock. Fancy was the first to return, followed by Enoch picking up the lantern. Mr. Shiner still remained invisible.

"Have the craters stung ye?" said Enoch to Geoffrey.

"No, not much — on'y a little here and there," he said with leisurely solemnity, shaking one bee out of his shirt sleeve, pulling another from among his hair, and two or three more from his neck. The rest looked on during this proceeding with a complacent sense of being out of it, — much as a European nation in a state of internal commotion is watched by its neighbours.

"Are those all of them, father?" said Fancy, when Geoffrey had pulled away five.

"Almost all, — though I feel one or two more sticking into my shoulder and side. Ah! there's another just begun again upon my backbone. You lively young mortals, how did you get inside there? However, they can't sting me many times more, poor things, for they must be getting weak. They mid as well stay in me till bedtime now, I suppose."

As he himself was the only person affected by this arrangement, it seemed satisfactory enough; and after a noise of feet kicking against cabbages in a blundering progress among them, the voice of Mr. Shiner was heard from the darkness in that direction.

"Is all quite safe again?"

No answer being returned to this query, he apparently assumed that he might venture forth, and gradually drew near the lantern again. The hives were now removed

from their position over the holes, one being handed to Enoch to carry indoors, and one being taken by Geoffrey himself.

“Bring hither the lantern, Fancy: the spade can bide.”

Geoffrey and Enoch then went towards the house, leaving Shiner and Fancy standing side by side on the garden-plot.

“Allow me,” said Shiner, stooping for the lantern and seizing it at the same time with Fancy.

“I can carry it,” said Fancy, religiously repressing all inclination to trifle. She had thoroughly considered that subject after the tearful explanation of the bird-catching adventure to Dick, and had decided that it would be dishonest in her, as an engaged young woman, to trifle with men’s eyes and hands any more. Finding that Shiner still retained his hold of the lantern, she relinquished it, and he, having found her retaining it, also let go. The lantern fell, and was extinguished. Fancy moved on.

“Where is the path?” said Mr. Shiner.

“Here,” said Fancy. “Your eyes will get used to the dark in a minute or two.”

“Till that time will ye lend me your hand?” Fancy gave him the extreme tips of her fingers, and they stepped from the plot into the path.

“You don’t accept attentions very freely.”

“It depends upon who offers them.”

“A fellow like me, for instance.” A dead silence.

“Well, what do you say, Missie?”

“It then depends upon how they are offered.”

“Not wildly, and yet not careless-like; not purposely, and yet not by chance; not too quick nor yet too slow.”

“How then?” said Fancy.

“Coolly and practically,” he said. “How would that kind of love be taken?”

“Not anxiously, and yet not indifferently; neither blushing nor pale; nor religiously nor yet quite wickedly.”

“Well, how?”

“Not at all.”

* * * * *

Geoffrey Day’s storehouse at the back of his dwelling was hung with bunches of dried horehound, mint, and sage; brown-paper bags of thyme and lavender; and long ropes of clean onions. On shelves were spread large red and yellow apples, and choice selections of early potatoes for seed next year; — vulgar crowds of commoner kind lying beneath in heaps. A few empty beehives were clustered around a nail in one corner, under which stood two or three barrels of new cider of the first crop, each bubbling and squirting forth from the yet open bunghole.

Fancy was now kneeling beside the two inverted hives, one of which rested against her lap, for convenience in operating upon the contents. She thrust her sleeves above her elbows, and inserted her small pink hand edgewise between each white lobe of honeycomb, performing the act so adroitly and gently as not to unseal a single cell.

Then cracking the piece off at the crown of the hive by a slight backward and forward movement, she lifted each portion as it was loosened into a large blue platter, placed on a bench at her side.

“Bother these little mortals!” said Geoffrey, who was holding the light to her, and giving his back an uneasy twist. “I really think I may as well go indoors and take ‘em out, poor things! for they won’t let me alone. There’s two a stinging wi’ all their might now. I’m sure I wonder their strength can last so long.”

“All right, friend; I’ll hold the candle whilst you are gone,” said Mr. Shiner, leisurely taking the light, and allowing Geoffrey to depart, which he did with his usual long paces.

He could hardly have gone round to the house-door when other footsteps were heard approaching the outbuilding; the tip of a finger appeared in the hole through which the wood latch was lifted, and Dick Dewy came in, having been all this time walking up and down the wood, vainly waiting for Shiner’s departure.

Fancy looked up and welcomed him rather confusedly. Shiner grasped the candlestick more firmly, and, lest doing this in silence should not imply to Dick with sufficient force that he was quite at home and cool, he sang invincibly —

“‘King Arthur he had three sons.’”

“Father here?” said Dick.

“Indoors, I think,” said Fancy, looking pleasantly at him.

Dick surveyed the scene, and did not seem inclined to hurry off just at that moment. Shiner went on singing —

“‘The miller was drown’d in his pond,
The weaver was hung in his yarn,
And the d — - ran away with the little tail-or,
With the broadcloth under his arm.’”

“That’s a terrible crippled rhyme, if that’s your rhyme!” said Dick, with a grain of superciliousness in his tone.

“It’s no use your complaining to me about the rhyme!” said Mr. Shiner. “You must go to the man that made it.”

Fancy by this time had acquired confidence.

“Taste a bit, Mr. Dewy,” she said, holding up to him a small circular piece of honeycomb that had been the last in the row of layers, remaining still on her knees and flinging back her head to look in his face; “and then I’ll taste a bit too.”

“And I, if you please,” said Mr. Shiner. Nevertheless the farmer looked superior, as if he could even now hardly join the trifling from very importance of station; and after receiving the honeycomb from Fancy, he turned it over in his hand till the cells began to be crushed, and the liquid honey ran down from his fingers in a thin string.

Suddenly a faint cry from Fancy caused them to gaze at her.

“What’s the matter, dear?” said Dick.

“It is nothing, but O-o! a bee has stung the inside of my lip! He was in one of the cells I was eating!”

“We must keep down the swelling, or it may be serious!” said Shiner, stepping up and kneeling beside her. “Let me see it.”

“No, no!”

“Just let me see it,” said Dick, kneeling on the other side: and after some hesitation she pressed down her lip with one finger to show the place. “O, I hope ‘twill soon be better! I don’t mind a sting in ordinary places, but it is so bad upon your lip,” she added with tears in her eyes, and writhing a little from the pain.

Shiner held the light above his head and pushed his face close to Fancy’s, as if the lip had been shown exclusively to himself, upon which Dick pushed closer, as if Shiner were not there at all.

“It is swelling,” said Dick to her right aspect.

“It isn’t swelling,” said Shiner to her left aspect.

“Is it dangerous on the lip?” cried Fancy. “I know it is dangerous on the tongue.”

“O no, not dangerous!” answered Dick.

“Rather dangerous,” had answered Shiner simultaneously.

“I must try to bear it!” said Fancy, turning again to the hives.

“Hartshorn-and-oil is a good thing to put to it, Miss Day,” said Shiner with great concern.

“Sweet-oil-and-hartshorn I’ve found to be a good thing to cure stings, Miss Day,” said Dick with greater concern.

“We have some mixed indoors; would you kindly run and get it for me?” she said.

Now, whether by inadvertence, or whether by mischievous intention, the individuality of the you was so carelessly denoted that both Dick and Shiner sprang to their feet like twin acrobats, and marched abreast to the door; both seized the latch and lifted it, and continued marching on, shoulder to shoulder, in the same manner to the dwelling-house. Not only so, but entering the room, they marched as before straight up to Mrs. Day’s chair, letting the door in the oak partition slam so forcibly, that the rows of pewter on the dresser rang like a bell.

“Mrs. Day, Fancy has stung her lip, and wants you to give me the hartshorn, please,” said Mr. Shiner, very close to Mrs. Day’s face.

“O, Mrs. Day, Fancy has asked me to bring out the hartshorn, please, because she has stung her lip!” said Dick, a little closer to Mrs. Day’s face.

“Well, men alive! that’s no reason why you should eat me, I suppose!” said Mrs. Day, drawing back.

She searched in the corner-cupboard, produced the bottle, and began to dust the cork, the rim, and every other part very carefully, Dick’s hand and Shiner’s hand waiting side by side.

“Which is head man?” said Mrs. Day. “Now, don’t come mumbudgeting so close again. Which is head man?”

Neither spoke; and the bottle was inclined towards Shiner. Shiner, as a high-class man, would not look in the least triumphant, and turned to go off with it as Geoffrey came downstairs after the search in his linen for concealed bees.

“O — that you, Master Dewy?”

Dick assured the keeper that it was; and the young man then determined upon a bold stroke for the attainment of his end, forgetting that the worst of bold strokes is the disastrous consequences they involve if they fail.

“I’ve come on purpose to speak to you very particular, Mr. Day,” he said, with a crushing emphasis intended for the ears of Mr. Shiner, who was vanishing round the door-post at that moment.

“Well, I’ve been forced to go upstairs and unrind myself, and shake some bees out o’ me” said Geoffrey, walking slowly towards the open door, and standing on the threshold. “The young rascals got into my shirt and wouldn’t be quiet nohow.”

Dick followed him to the door.

“I’ve come to speak a word to you,” he repeated, looking out at the pale mist creeping up from the gloom of the valley. “You may perhaps guess what it is about.”

The keeper lowered his hands into the depths of his pockets, twirled his eyes, balanced himself on his toes, looked as perpendicularly downward as if his glance were a plumb-line, then horizontally, collecting together the cracks that lay about his face till they were all in the neighbourhood of his eyes.

“Maybe I don’t know,” he replied.

Dick said nothing; and the stillness was disturbed only by some small bird that was being killed by an owl in the adjoining wood, whose cry passed into the silence without mingling with it.

“I’ve left my hat up in chammer,” said Geoffrey; “wait while I step up and get en.”

“I’ll be in the garden,” said Dick.

He went round by a side wicket into the garden, and Geoffrey went upstairs. It was the custom in Mellstock and its vicinity to discuss matters of pleasure and ordinary business inside the house, and to reserve the garden for very important affairs: a custom which, as is supposed, originated in the desirability of getting away at such times from the other members of the family when there was only one room for living in, though it was now quite as frequently practised by those who suffered from no such limitation to the size of their domiciles.

The head-keeper’s form appeared in the dusky garden, and Dick walked towards him. The elder paused and leant over the rail of a piggery that stood on the left of the path, upon which Dick did the same; and they both contemplated a whitish shadowy shape that was moving about and grunting among the straw of the interior.

“I’ve come to ask for Fancy,” said Dick.

“I’d as lief you hadn’t.”

“Why should that be, Mr. Day?”

“Because it makes me say that you’ve come to ask what ye be’n’t likely to have. Have ye come for anything else?”

“Nothing.”

“Then I’ll just tell ‘ee you’ve come on a very foolish errand. D’ye know what her mother was?”

“No.”

“A teacher in a landed family’s nursery, who was foolish enough to marry the keeper of the same establishment; for I was only a keeper then, though now I’ve a dozen other irons in the fire as steward here for my lord, what with the timber sales and the yearly fellings, and the gravel and sand sales and one thing and ‘tother. However, d’ye think Fancy picked up her good manners, the smooth turn of her tongue, her musical notes, and her knowledge of books, in a homely hole like this?”

“No.”

“D’ye know where?”

“No.”

“Well, when I went a-wandering after her mother’s death, she lived with her aunt, who kept a boarding-school, till her aunt married Lawyer Green — a man as sharp as a needle — and the school was broke up. Did ye know that then she went to the training-school, and that her name stood first among the Queen’s scholars of her year?”

“I’ve heard so.”

“And that when she sat for her certificate as Government teacher, she had the highest of the first class?”

“Yes.”

“Well, and do ye know what I live in such a miserly way for when I’ve got enough to do without it, and why I make her work as a schoolmistress instead of living here?”

“No.”

“That if any gentleman, who sees her to be his equal in polish, should want to marry her, and she want to marry him, he sha’n’t be superior to her in pocket. Now do ye think after this that you be good enough for her?”

“No.”

“Then good-night t’ee, Master Dewy.”

“Good-night, Mr. Day.”

Modest Dick’s reply had faltered upon his tongue, and he turned away wondering at his presumption in asking for a woman whom he had seen from the beginning to be so superior to him.

CHAPTER III:

FANCY IN THE RAIN

The next scene is a tempestuous afternoon in the following month, and Fancy Day is discovered walking from her father’s home towards Mellstock.

A single vast gray cloud covered the country, from which the small rain and mist had just begun to blow down in wavy sheets, alternately thick and thin. The trees of the fields and plantations writhed like miserable men as the air wound its way swiftly among them: the lowest portions of their trunks, that had hardly ever been known to move, were visibly rocked by the fiercer gusts, distressing the mind by its painful

unwontedness, as when a strong man is seen to shed tears. Low-hanging boughs went up and down; high and erect boughs went to and fro; the blasts being so irregular, and divided into so many cross-currents, that neighbouring branches of the same tree swept the skies in independent motions, crossed each other, or became entangled. Across the open spaces flew flocks of green and yellowish leaves, which, after travelling a long distance from their parent trees, reached the ground, and lay there with their undersides upward.

As the rain and wind increased, and Fancy's bonnet-ribbons leapt more and more snappishly against her chin, she paused on entering Mellstock Lane to consider her latitude, and the distance to a place of shelter. The nearest house was Elizabeth Endorfield's, in Higher Mellstock, whose cottage and garden stood not far from the junction of that hamlet with the road she followed. Fancy hastened onward, and in five minutes entered a gate, which shed upon her toes a flood of water-drops as she opened it.

"Come in, chiel!" a voice exclaimed, before Fancy had knocked: a promptness that would have surprised her had she not known that Mrs. Endorfield was an exceedingly and exceptionally sharp woman in the use of her eyes and ears.

Fancy went in and sat down. Elizabeth was paring potatoes for her husband's supper.

Scrape, scrape, scrape; then a toss, and splash went a potato into a bucket of water.

Now, as Fancy listlessly noted these proceedings of the dame, she began to reconsider an old subject that lay uppermost in her heart. Since the interview between her father and Dick, the days had been melancholy days for her. Geoffrey's firm opposition to the notion of Dick as a son-in-law was more than she had expected. She had frequently seen her lover since that time, it is true, and had loved him more for the opposition than she would have otherwise dreamt of doing — which was a happiness of a certain kind. Yet, though love is thus an end in itself, it must be believed to be the means to another end if it is to assume the rosy hues of an unalloyed pleasure. And such a belief Fancy and Dick were emphatically denied just now.

Elizabeth Endorfield had a repute among women which was in its nature something between distinction and notoriety. It was founded on the following items of character. She was shrewd and penetrating; her house stood in a lonely place; she never went to church; she wore a red cloak; she always retained her bonnet indoors and she had a pointed chin. Thus far her attributes were distinctly Satanic; and those who looked no further called her, in plain terms, a witch. But she was not gaunt, nor ugly in the upper part of her face, nor particularly strange in manner; so that, when her more intimate acquaintances spoke of her the term was softened, and she became simply a Deep Body, who was as long-headed as she was high. It may be stated that Elizabeth belonged to a class of suspects who were gradually losing their mysterious characteristics under the administration of the young vicar; though, during the long reign of Mr. Grinham, the parish of Mellstock had proved extremely favourable to the growth of witches.

While Fancy was revolving all this in her mind, and putting it to herself whether it was worth while to tell her troubles to Elizabeth, and ask her advice in getting out of them, the witch spoke.

“You be down — proper down,” she said suddenly, dropping another potato into the bucket.

Fancy took no notice.

“About your young man.”

Fancy reddened. Elizabeth seemed to be watching her thoughts. Really, one would almost think she must have the powers people ascribed to her.

“Father not in the humour for’t, hey?” Another potato was finished and flung in. “Ah, I know about it. Little birds tell me things that people don’t dream of my knowing.”

Fancy was desperate about Dick, and here was a chance — O, such a wicked chance — of getting help; and what was goodness beside love!

“I wish you’d tell me how to put him in the humour for it?” she said.

“That I could soon do,” said the witch quietly.

“Really? O, do; anyhow — I don’t care — so that it is done! How could I do it, Mrs. Endorfield?”

“Nothing so mighty wonderful in it.”

“Well, but how?”

“By witchery, of course!” said Elizabeth.

“No!” said Fancy.

“‘Tis, I assure ye. Didn’t you ever hear I was a witch?”

“Well,” hesitated Fancy, “I have heard you called so.”

“And you believed it?”

“I can’t say that I did exactly believe it, for ‘tis very horrible and wicked; but, O, how I do wish it was possible for you to be one!”

“So I am. And I’ll tell you how to bewitch your father to let you marry Dick Dewy.”

“Will it hurt him, poor thing?”

“Hurt who?”

“Father.”

“No; the charm is worked by common sense, and the spell can only be broke by your acting stupidly.”

Fancy looked rather perplexed, and Elizabeth went on:

“This fear of Lizz — whatever ‘tis —

By great and small;

She makes pretence to common sense,

And that’s all.

“You must do it like this.” The witch laid down her knife and potato, and then poured into Fancy’s ear a long and detailed list of directions, glancing up from the corner of her eye into Fancy’s face with an expression of sinister humour. Fancy’s face brightened, clouded, rose and sank, as the narrative proceeded. “There,” said Elizabeth

at length, stooping for the knife and another potato, "do that, and you'll have him by-long and by-late, my dear."

"And do it I will!" said Fancy.

She then turned her attention to the external world once more. The rain continued as usual, but the wind had abated considerably during the discourse. Judging that it was now possible to keep an umbrella erect, she pulled her hood again over her bonnet, bade the witch good-bye, and went her way.

CHAPTER IV:

THE SPELL

Mrs. Endorfield's advice was duly followed.

"I be proper sorry that your daughter isn't so well as she might be," said a Mellstock man to Geoffrey one morning.

"But is there anything in it?" said Geoffrey uneasily, as he shifted his hat to the right. "I can't understand the report. She didn't complain to me a bit when I saw her."

"No appetite at all, they say."

Geoffrey crossed to Mellstock and called at the school that afternoon. Fancy welcomed him as usual, and asked him to stay and take tea with her.

"I be'n't much for tea, this time o' day," he said, but stayed.

During the meal he watched her narrowly. And to his great consternation discovered the following unprecedented change in the healthy girl — that she cut herself only a diaphanous slice of bread-and-butter, and, laying it on her plate, passed the meal-time in breaking it into pieces, but eating no more than about one-tenth of the slice. Geoffrey hoped she would say something about Dick, and finish up by weeping, as she had done after the decision against him a few days subsequent to the interview in the garden. But nothing was said, and in due time Geoffrey departed again for Yalbury Wood.

"'Tis to be hoped poor Miss Fancy will be able to keep on her school," said Geoffrey's man Enoch to Geoffrey the following week, as they were shovelling up ant-hills in the wood.

Geoffrey stuck in the shovel, swept seven or eight ants from his sleeve, and killed another that was prowling round his ear, then looked perpendicularly into the earth as usual, waiting for Enoch to say more. "Well, why shouldn't she?" said the keeper at last.

"The baker told me yesterday," continued Enoch, shaking out another emmet that had run merrily up his thigh, "that the bread he've left at that there school-house this last month would starve any mouse in the three creations; that 'twould so! And afterwards I had a pint o' small down at Morr's, and there I heard more."

"What might that ha' been?"

"That she used to have a pound o' the best rolled butter a week, regular as clockwork, from Dairyman Viney's for herself, as well as just so much salted for the helping girl,

and the 'ooman she calls in; but now the same quantity d'last her three weeks, and then 'tis thoughted she throws it away sour."

"Finish doing the emmets, and carry the bag home-along." The keeper resumed his gun, tucked it under his arm, and went on without whistling to the dogs, who however followed, with a bearing meant to imply that they did not expect any such attentions when their master was reflecting.

On Saturday morning a note came from Fancy. He was not to trouble about sending her the couple of rabbits, as was intended, because she feared she should not want them. Later in the day Geoffrey went to Casterbridge and called upon the butcher who served Fancy with fresh meat, which was put down to her father's account.

"I've called to pay up our little bill, Neighbour Haylock, and you can gie me the chiel's account at the same time."

Mr. Haylock turned round three quarters of a circle in the midst of a heap of joints, altered the expression of his face from meat to money, went into a little office consisting only of a door and a window, looked very vigorously into a book which possessed length but no breadth; and then, seizing a piece of paper and scribbling thereupon, handed the bill.

Probably it was the first time in the history of commercial transactions that the quality of shortness in a butcher's bill was a cause of tribulation to the debtor. "Why, this isn't all she've had in a whole month!" said Geoffrey.

"Every mossel," said the butcher — "(now, Dan, take that leg and shoulder to Mrs. White's, and this eleven pound here to Mr. Martin's) — you've been treating her to smaller joints lately, to my thinking, Mr. Day?"

"Only two or three little scam rabbits this last week, as I am alive — I wish I had!"

"Well, my wife said to me — (Dan! not too much, not too much on that tray at a time; better go twice) — my wife said to me as she posted up the books: she says, 'Miss Day must have been affronted this summer during that hot muggy weather that spolit so much for us; for depend upon't,' she says, 'she've been trying John Grimmett unknown to us: see her account else.' 'Tis little, of course, at the best of times, being only for one, but now 'tis next kin to nothing."

"I'll inquire," said Geoffrey despondingly.

He returned by way of Mellstock, and called upon Fancy, in fulfilment of a promise. It being Saturday, the children were enjoying a holiday, and on entering the residence Fancy was nowhere to be seen. Nan, the charwoman, was sweeping the kitchen.

"Where's my da'ter?" said the keeper.

"Well, you see she was tired with the week's teaching, and this morning she said, 'Nan, I sha'n't get up till the evening.' You see, Mr. Day, if people don't eat, they can't work; and as she've gie'd up eating, she must gie up working."

"Have ye carried up any dinner to her?"

"No; she don't want any. There, we all know that such things don't come without good reason — not that I wish to say anything about a broken heart, or anything of the kind."

Geoffrey's own heart felt inconveniently large just then. He went to the staircase and ascended to his daughter's door.

"Fancy!"

"Come in, father."

To see a person in bed from any cause whatever, on a fine afternoon, is depressing enough; and here was his only child Fancy, not only in bed, but looking very pale. Geoffrey was visibly disturbed.

"Fancy, I didn't expect to see thee here, chiel," he said. "What's the matter?"

"I'm not well, father."

"How's that?"

"Because I think of things."

"What things can you have to think o' so mortal much?"

"You know, father."

"You think I've been cruel to thee in saying that that penniless Dick o' thine sha'n't marry thee, I suppose?"

No answer.

"Well, you know, Fancy, I do it for the best, and he isn't good enough for thee. You know that well enough." Here he again looked at her as she lay. "Well, Fancy, I can't let my only chiel die; and if you can't live without en, you must ha' en, I suppose."

"O, I don't want him like that; all against your will, and everything so disobedient!" sighed the invalid.

"No, no, 't isn't against my will. My wish is, now I d'see how 'tis hurten thee to live without en, that he shall marry thee as soon as we've considered a little. That's my wish flat and plain, Fancy. There, never cry, my little maid! You ought to ha' cried afore; no need o' crying now 'tis all over. Well, howsoever, try to step over and see me and mother-law to-morrow, and ha' a bit of dinner wi' us."

"And — Dick too?"

"Ay, Dick too, 'far's I know."

"And when do you think you'll have considered, father, and he may marry me?" she coaxed.

"Well, there, say next Midsummer; that's not a day too long to wait."

On leaving the school Geoffrey went to the tranter's. Old William opened the door.

"Is your grandson Dick in 'ithin, William?"

"No, not just now, Mr. Day. Though he've been at home a good deal lately."

"O, how's that?"

"What wi' one thing, and what wi' t'other, he's all in a mope, as might be said. Don't seem the feller he used to. Ay, 'a will sit studding and thinking as if 'a were going to turn chapel-member, and then do nothing but traypse and wamble about. Used to be such a chatty boy, too, Dick did; and now 'a don't speak at all. But won't ye step inside? Reuben will be home soon, 'a b'lieve."

“No, thank you, I can’t stay now. Will ye just ask Dick if he’ll do me the kindness to step over to Yalbury to-morrow with my da’ter Fancy, if she’s well enough? I don’t like her to come by herself, now she’s not so terrible topping in health.”

“So I’ve heard. Ay, sure, I’ll tell him without fail.”

CHAPTER V:

AFTER GAINING HER POINT

The visit to Geoffrey passed off as delightfully as a visit might have been expected to pass off when it was the first day of smooth experience in a hitherto obstructed love-course. And then came a series of several happy days, of the same undisturbed serenity. Dick could court her when he chose; stay away when he chose, — which was never; walk with her by winding streams and waterfalls and autumn scenery till dews and twilight sent them home. And thus they drew near the day of the Harvest Thanksgiving, which was also the time chosen for opening the organ in Mellstock Church.

It chanced that Dick on that very day was called away from Mellstock. A young acquaintance had died of consumption at Charmley, a neighbouring village, on the previous Monday, and Dick, in fulfilment of a long-standing promise, was to assist in carrying him to the grave. When on Tuesday, Dick went towards the school to acquaint Fancy with the fact, it is difficult to say whether his own disappointment at being denied the sight of her triumphant *début* as organist, was greater than his vexation that his pet should on this great occasion be deprived of the pleasure of his presence. However, the intelligence was communicated. She bore it as she best could, not without many expressions of regret, and convictions that her performance would be nothing to her now.

Just before eleven o’clock on Sunday he set out upon his sad errand. The funeral was to be immediately after the morning service, and as there were four good miles to walk, driving being inconvenient, it became necessary to start comparatively early. Half an hour later would certainly have answered his purpose quite as well, yet at the last moment nothing would content his ardent mind but that he must go a mile out of his way in the direction of the school, in the hope of getting a glimpse of his Love as she started for church.

Striking, therefore, into the lane towards the school, instead of across the ewelease direct to Charmley, he arrived opposite her door as his goddess emerged.

If ever a woman looked a divinity, Fancy Day appeared one that morning as she floated down those school steps, in the form of a nebulous collection of colours inclining to blue. With an audacity unparalleled in the whole history of village-school-mistresses at this date — partly owing, no doubt, to papa’s respectable accumulation of cash, which rendered her profession not altogether one of necessity — she had actually donned a hat and feather, and lowered her hitherto plainly looped-up hair, which now fell about her shoulders in a profusion of curls. Poor Dick was astonished: he had never

seen her look so distractingly beautiful before, save on Christmas-eve, when her hair was in the same luxuriant condition of freedom. But his first burst of delighted surprise was followed by less comfortable feelings, as soon as his brain recovered its power to think.

Fancy had blushed; — was it with confusion? She had also involuntarily pressed back her curls. She had not expected him.

“Fancy, you didn’t know me for a moment in my funeral clothes, did you?”

“Good-morning, Dick — no, really, I didn’t know you for an instant in such a sad suit.”

He looked again at the gay tresses and hat. “You’ve never dressed so charming before, dearest.”

“I like to hear you praise me in that way, Dick,” she said, smiling archly. “It is meat and drink to a woman. Do I look nice really?”

“Fie! you know it. Did you remember, — I mean didn’t you remember about my going away to-day?”

“Well, yes, I did, Dick; but, you know, I wanted to look well; — forgive me.”

“Yes, darling; yes, of course, — there’s nothing to forgive. No, I was only thinking that when we talked on Tuesday and Wednesday and Thursday and Friday about my absence to-day, and I was so sorry for it, you said, Fancy, so were you sorry, and almost cried, and said it would be no pleasure to you to be the attraction of the church to-day, since I could not be there.”

“My dear one, neither will it be so much pleasure to me . . . But I do take a little delight in my life, I suppose,” she pouted.

“Apart from mine?”

She looked at him with perplexed eyes. “I know you are vexed with me, Dick, and it is because the first Sunday I have curls and a hat and feather since I have been here happens to be the very day you are away and won’t be with me. Yes, say it is, for that is it! And you think that all this week I ought to have remembered you wouldn’t be here to-day, and not have cared to be better dressed than usual. Yes, you do, Dick, and it is rather unkind!”

“No, no,” said Dick earnestly and simply, “I didn’t think so badly of you as that. I only thought that — if you had been going away, I shouldn’t have tried new attractions for the eyes of other people. But then of course you and I are different, naturally.”

“Well, perhaps we are.”

“Whatever will the vicar say, Fancy?”

“I don’t fear what he says in the least!” she answered proudly. “But he won’t say anything of the sort you think. No, no.”

“He can hardly have conscience to, indeed.”

“Now come, you say, Dick, that you quite forgive me, for I must go,” she said with sudden gaiety, and skipped backwards into the porch. “Come here, sir; — say you forgive me, and then you shall kiss me; — you never have yet when I have worn curls, you know. Yes, just where you want to so much, — yes, you may!”

Dick followed her into the inner corner, where he was probably not slow in availing himself of the privilege offered.

“Now that’s a treat for you, isn’t it?” she continued. “Good-bye, or I shall be late. Come and see me to-morrow: you’ll be tired to-night.”

Thus they parted, and Fancy proceeded to the church. The organ stood on one side of the chancel, close to and under the immediate eye of the vicar when he was in the pulpit, and also in full view of the congregation. Here she sat down, for the first time in such a conspicuous position, her seat having previously been in a remote spot in the aisle.

“Good heavens — disgraceful! Curls and a hat and feather!” said the daughters of the small gentry, who had either only curly hair without a hat and feather, or a hat and feather without curly hair. “A bonnet for church always,” said sober matrons.

That Mr. Maybold was conscious of her presence close beside him during the sermon; that he was not at all angry at her development of costume; that he admired her, she perceived. But she did not see that he loved her during that sermon-time as he had never loved a woman before; that her proximity was a strange delight to him; and that he gloried in her musical success that morning in a spirit quite beyond a mere cleric’s glory at the inauguration of a new order of things.

The old choir, with humbled hearts, no longer took their seats in the gallery as heretofore (which was now given up to the school-children who were not singers, and a pupil-teacher), but were scattered about with their wives in different parts of the church. Having nothing to do with conducting the service for almost the first time in their lives, they all felt awkward, out of place, abashed, and inconvenienced by their hands. The tranter had proposed that they should stay away to-day and go nutting, but grandfather William would not hear of such a thing for a moment. “No,” he replied reproachfully, and quoted a verse: “Though this has come upon us, let not our hearts be turned back, or our steps go out of the way.”

So they stood and watched the curls of hair trailing down the back of the successful rival, and the waving of her feather, as she swayed her head. After a few timid notes and uncertain touches her playing became markedly correct, and towards the end full and free. But, whether from prejudice or unbiassed judgment, the venerable body of musicians could not help thinking that the simpler notes they had been wont to bring forth were more in keeping with the simplicity of their old church than the crowded chords and interludes it was her pleasure to produce.

CHAPTER VI:

INTO TEMPTATION

The day was done, and Fancy was again in the school-house. About five o’clock it began to rain, and in rather a dull frame of mind she wandered into the schoolroom, for want of something better to do. She was thinking — of her lover Dick Dewy? Not

precisely. Of how weary she was of living alone: how unbearable it would be to return to Yalbury under the rule of her strange-tempered step-mother; that it was far better to be married to anybody than do that; that eight or nine long months had yet to be lived through ere the wedding could take place.

At the side of the room were high windows of Ham-hill stone, upon either sill of which she could sit by first mounting a desk and using it as a footstool. As the evening advanced here she perched herself, as was her custom on such wet and gloomy occasions, put on a light shawl and bonnet, opened the window, and looked out at the rain.

The window overlooked a field called the Grove, and it was the position from which she used to survey the crown of Dick's passing hat in the early days of their acquaintance and meetings. Not a living soul was now visible anywhere; the rain kept all people indoors who were not forced abroad by necessity, and necessity was less importunate on Sundays than during the week.

Sitting here and thinking again — of her lover, or of the sensation she had created at church that day? — well, it is unknown — thinking and thinking she saw a dark masculine figure arising into distinctness at the further end of the Grove — a man without an umbrella. Nearer and nearer he came, and she perceived that he was in deep mourning, and then that it was Dick. Yes, in the fondness and foolishness of his young heart, after walking four miles, in a drizzling rain without overcoat or umbrella, and in face of a remark from his love that he was not to come because he would be tired, he had made it his business to wander this mile out of his way again, from sheer wish of spending ten minutes in her presence.

“O Dick, how wet you are!” she said, as he drew up under the window. “Why, your coat shines as if it had been varnished, and your hat — my goodness, there's a streaming hat!”

“O, I don't mind, darling!” said Dick cheerfully. “Wet never hurts me, though I am rather sorry for my best clothes. However, it couldn't be helped; we lent all the umbrellas to the women. I don't know when I shall get mine back!”

“And look, there's a nasty patch of something just on your shoulder.”

“Ah, that's japanning; it rubbed off the clamps of poor Jack's coffin when we lowered him from our shoulders upon the bier! I don't care about that, for 'twas the last deed I could do for him; and 'tis hard if you can't afford a coat for an old friend.”

Fancy put her hand to her mouth for half a minute. Underneath the palm of that little hand there existed for that half-minute a little yawn.

“Dick, I don't like you to stand there in the wet. And you mustn't sit down. Go home and change your things. Don't stay another minute.”

“One kiss after coming so far,” he pleaded.

“If I can reach, then.”

He looked rather disappointed at not being invited round to the door. She twisted from her seated position and bent herself downwards, but not even by standing on the plinth was it possible for Dick to get his lips into contact with hers as she held

them. By great exertion she might have reached a little lower; but then she would have exposed her head to the rain.

“Never mind, Dick; kiss my hand,” she said, flinging it down to him. “Now, good-bye.”
“Good-bye.”

He walked slowly away, turning and turning again to look at her till he was out of sight. During the retreat she said to herself, almost involuntarily, and still conscious of that morning’s triumph — ”I like Dick, and I love him; but how plain and sorry a man looks in the rain, with no umbrella, and wet through!”

As he vanished, she made as if to descend from her seat; but glancing in the other direction she saw another form coming along the same track. It was also that of a man. He, too, was in black from top to toe; but he carried an umbrella.

He drew nearer, and the direction of the rain caused him so to slant his umbrella that from her height above the ground his head was invisible, as she was also to him. He passed in due time directly beneath her, and in looking down upon the exterior of his umbrella her feminine eyes perceived it to be of superior silk — less common at that date than since — and of elegant make. He reached the entrance to the building, and Fancy suddenly lost sight of him. Instead of pursuing the roadway as Dick had done he had turned sharply round into her own porch.

She jumped to the floor, hastily flung off her shawl and bonnet, smoothed and patted her hair till the curls hung in passable condition, and listened. No knock. Nearly a minute passed, and still there was no knock. Then there arose a soft series of raps, no louder than the tapping of a distant woodpecker, and barely distinct enough to reach her ears. She composed herself and flung open the door.

In the porch stood Mr. Maybold.

There was a warm flush upon his face, and a bright flash in his eyes, which made him look handsomer than she had ever seen him before.

“Good-evening, Miss Day.”

“Good-evening, Mr. Maybold,” she said, in a strange state of mind. She had noticed, beyond the ardent hue of his face, that his voice had a singular tremor in it, and that his hand shook like an aspen leaf when he laid his umbrella in the corner of the porch. Without another word being spoken by either, he came into the schoolroom, shut the door, and moved close to her. Once inside, the expression of his face was no more discernible, by reason of the increasing dusk of evening.

“I want to speak to you,” he then said; “seriously — on a perhaps unexpected subject, but one which is all the world to me — I don’t know what it may be to you, Miss Day.”

No reply.

“Fancy, I have come to ask you if you will be my wife?”

As a person who has been idly amusing himself with rolling a snowball might start at finding he had set in motion an avalanche, so did Fancy start at these words from the vicar. And in the dead silence which followed them, the breathings of the man and of the woman could be distinctly and separately heard; and there was this difference between

them — his respirations gradually grew quieter and less rapid after the enunciation hers, from having been low and regular, increased in quickness and force, till she almost panted.

“I cannot, I cannot, Mr. Maybold — I cannot! Don’t ask me!” she said.

“Don’t answer in a hurry!” he entreated. “And do listen to me. This is no sudden feeling on my part. I have loved you for more than six months! Perhaps my late interest in teaching the children here has not been so single-minded as it seemed. You will understand my motive — like me better, perhaps, for honestly telling you that I have struggled against my emotion continually, because I have thought that it was not well for me to love you! But I resolved to struggle no longer; I have examined the feeling; and the love I bear you is as genuine as that I could bear any woman! I see your great charm; I respect your natural talents, and the refinement they have brought into your nature — they are quite enough, and more than enough for me! They are equal to anything ever required of the mistress of a quiet parsonage-house — the place in which I shall pass my days, wherever it may be situated. O Fancy, I have watched you, criticized you even severely, brought my feelings to the light of judgment, and still have found them rational, and such as any man might have expected to be inspired with by a woman like you! So there is nothing hurried, secret, or untoward in my desire to do this. Fancy, will you marry me?”

No answer was returned.

“Don’t refuse; don’t,” he implored. “It would be foolish of you — I mean cruel! Of course we would not live here, Fancy. I have had for a long time the offer of an exchange of livings with a friend in Yorkshire, but I have hitherto refused on account of my mother. There we would go. Your musical powers shall be still further developed; you shall have whatever pianoforte you like; you shall have anything, Fancy, anything to make you happy — pony-carriage, flowers, birds, pleasant society; yes, you have enough in you for any society, after a few months of travel with me! Will you, Fancy, marry me?”

Another pause ensued, varied only by the surging of the rain against the window-panes, and then Fancy spoke, in a faint and broken voice.

“Yes, I will,” she said.

“God bless you, my own!” He advanced quickly, and put his arm out to embrace her. She drew back hastily. “No no, not now!” she said in an agitated whisper. “There are things; — but the temptation is, O, too strong, and I can’t resist it; I can’t tell you now, but I must tell you! Don’t, please, don’t come near me now! I want to think, I can scarcely get myself used to the idea of what I have promised yet.” The next minute she turned to a desk, buried her face in her hands, and burst into a hysterical fit of weeping. “O, leave me to myself!” she sobbed; “leave me! O, leave me!”

“Don’t be distressed; don’t, dearest!” It was with visible difficulty that he restrained himself from approaching her. “You shall tell me at your leisure what it is that grieves you so; I am happy — beyond all measure happy! — at having your simple promise.”

“And do go and leave me now!”

“But I must not, in justice to you, leave for a minute, until you are yourself again.”

“There then,” she said, controlling her emotion, and standing up; “I am not disturbed now.”

He reluctantly moved towards the door. “Good-bye!” he murmured tenderly. “I’ll come to-morrow about this time.”

CHAPTER VII:

SECOND THOUGHTS

The next morning the vicar rose early. The first thing he did was to write a long and careful letter to his friend in Yorkshire. Then, eating a little breakfast, he crossed the meadows in the direction of Casterbridge, bearing his letter in his pocket, that he might post it at the town office, and obviate the loss of one day in its transmission that would have resulted had he left it for the foot-post through the village.

It was a foggy morning, and the trees shed in noisy water-drops the moisture they had collected from the thick air, an acorn occasionally falling from its cup to the ground, in company with the drippings. In the meads, sheets of spiders’-web, almost opaque with wet, hung in folds over the fences, and the falling leaves appeared in every variety of brown, green, and yellow hue.

A low and merry whistling was heard on the highway he was approaching, then the light footsteps of a man going in the same direction as himself. On reaching the junction of his path with the road, the vicar beheld Dick Dewy’s open and cheerful face. Dick lifted his hat, and the vicar came out into the highway that Dick was pursuing.

“Good-morning, Dewy. How well you are looking!” said Mr. Maybold.

“Yes, sir, I am well — quite well! I am going to Casterbridge now, to get Smart’s collar; we left it there Saturday to be repaired.”

“I am going to Casterbridge, so we’ll walk together,” the vicar said. Dick gave a hop with one foot to put himself in step with Mr. Maybold, who proceeded: “I fancy I didn’t see you at church yesterday, Dewy. Or were you behind the pier?”

“No; I went to Charmley. Poor John Dunford chose me to be one of his bearers a long time before he died, and yesterday was the funeral. Of course I couldn’t refuse, though I should have liked particularly to have been at home as ‘twas the day of the new music.”

“Yes, you should have been. The musical portion of the service was successful — very successful indeed; and what is more to the purpose, no ill-feeling whatever was evinced by any of the members of the old choir. They joined in the singing with the greatest good-will.”

“‘Twas natural enough that I should want to be there, I suppose,” said Dick, smiling a private smile; “considering who the organ-player was.”

At this the vicar reddened a little, and said, "Yes, yes," though not at all comprehending Dick's true meaning, who, as he received no further reply, continued hesitatingly, and with another smile denoting his pride as a lover —

"I suppose you know what I mean, sir? You've heard about me and — Miss Day?"

The red in Maybold's countenance went away: he turned and looked Dick in the face.

"No," he said constrainedly, "I've heard nothing whatever about you and Miss Day."

"Why, she's my sweetheart, and we are going to be married next Midsummer. We are keeping it rather close just at present, because 'tis a good many months to wait; but it is her father's wish that we don't marry before, and of course we must submit. But the time 'ill soon slip along."

"Yes, the time will soon slip along — Time glides away every day — yes."

Maybold said these words, but he had no idea of what they were. He was conscious of a cold and sickly thrill throughout him; and all he reasoned was this that the young creature whose graces had intoxicated him into making the most imprudent resolution of his life, was less an angel than a woman.

"You see, sir," continued the ingenuous Dick, "'twill be better in one sense. I shall by that time be the regular manager of a branch o' father's business, which has very much increased lately, and business, which we think of starting elsewhere. It has very much increased lately, and we expect next year to keep a' extra couple of horses. We've already our eye on one — brown as a berry, neck like a rainbow, fifteen hands, and not a gray hair in her — offered us at twenty-five want a crown. And to kip pace with the times I have had some cards prented and I beg leave to hand you one, sir."

"Certainly," said the vicar, mechanically taking the card that Dick offered him.

"I turn in here by Grey's Bridge," said Dick. "I suppose you go straight on and up town?"

"Yes."

"Good-morning, sir."

"Good-morning, Dewy."

Maybold stood still upon the bridge, holding the card as it had been put into his hand, and Dick's footsteps died away towards Durnover Mill. The vicar's first voluntary action was to read the card: —

DEWY AND SON,
TRANTERS AND HAULIERS,
MELLSTOCK.

NB. — Furniture, Coals, Potatoes, Live and Dead Stock, removed to any distance on the shortest notice.

Mr. Maybold leant over the parapet of the bridge and looked into the river. He saw — without heeding — how the water came rapidly from beneath the arches, glided down a little steep, then spread itself over a pool in which dace, trout, and minnows sported at ease among the long green locks of weed that lay heaving and sinking with their roots towards the current. At the end of ten minutes spent leaning thus, he drew

from his pocket the letter to his friend, tore it deliberately into such minute fragments that scarcely two syllables remained in juxtaposition, and sent the whole handful of shreds fluttering into the water. Here he watched them eddy, dart, and turn, as they were carried downwards towards the ocean and gradually disappeared from his view. Finally he moved off, and pursued his way at a rapid pace back again to Mellstock Vicarage.

Nerving himself by a long and intense effort, he sat down in his study and wrote as follows:

“DEAR MISS DAY, — The meaning of your words, ‘the temptation is too strong,’ of your sadness and your tears, has been brought home to me by an accident. I know to-day what I did not know yesterday — that you are not a free woman.

“Why did you not tell me — why didn’t you? Did you suppose I knew? No. Had I known, my conduct in coming to you as I did would have been reprehensible.

“But I don’t chide you! Perhaps no blame attaches to you — I can’t tell. Fancy, though my opinion of you is assailed and disturbed in a way which cannot be expressed, I love you still, and my word to you holds good yet. But will you, in justice to an honest man who relies upon your word to him, consider whether, under the circumstances, you can honourably forsake him? — Yours ever sincerely,

“ARTHUR MAYBOLD.”

He rang the bell. “Tell Charles to take these copybooks and this note to the school at once.”

The maid took the parcel and the letter, and in a few minutes a boy was seen to leave the vicarage gate, with the one under his arm, and the other in his hand. The vicar sat with his hand to his brow, watching the lad as he descended Church Lane and entered the waterside path which intervened between that spot and the school.

Here he was met by another boy, and after a free salutation and pugilistic frisk had passed between the two, the second boy came on his way to the vicarage, and the other vanished out of sight.

The boy came to the door, and a note for Mr. Maybold was brought in.

He knew the writing. Opening the envelope with an unsteady hand, he read the subjoined words:

“DEAR MR. MAYBOLD, — I have been thinking seriously and sadly through the whole of the night of the question you put to me last evening and of my answer. That answer, as an honest woman, I had no right to give.

“It is my nature — perhaps all women’s — to love refinement of mind and manners; but even more than this, to be ever fascinated with the idea of surroundings more elegant and pleasing than those which have been customary. And you praised me, and praise is life to me. It was alone my sensations at these things which prompted my reply. Ambition and vanity they would be called; perhaps they are so.

“After this explanation I hope you will generously allow me to withdraw the answer I too hastily gave.

“And one more request. To keep the meeting of last night, and all that passed between us there, for ever a secret. Were it to become known, it would utterly blight the happiness of a trusting and generous man, whom I love still, and shall love always.
— Yours sincerely,

“FANCY DAY.

The last written communication that ever passed from the vicar to Fancy, was a note containing these words only:

“Tell him everything; it is best. He will forgive you.”

PART THE FIFTH: CONCLUSION

CHAPTER I:

‘THE KNOT THERE’S NO UNTYING’

The last day of the story is dated just subsequent to that point in the development of the seasons when country people go to bed among nearly naked trees, are lulled to sleep by a fall of rain, and awake next morning among green ones; when the landscape appears embarrassed with the sudden weight and brilliancy of its leaves; when the night-jar comes and strikes up for the summer his tune of one note; when the apple-trees have bloomed, and the roads and orchard-grass become spotted with fallen petals; when the faces of the delicate flowers are darkened, and their heads weighed down, by the throng of honey-bees, which increase their humming till humming is too mild a term for the all-pervading sound; and when cuckoos, blackbirds, and sparrows, that have hitherto been merry and respectful neighbours, become noisy and persistent intimates.

The exterior of Geoffrey Day’s house in Yalbury Wood appeared exactly as was usual at that season, but a frantic barking of the dogs at the back told of unwonted movements somewhere within. Inside the door the eyes beheld a gathering, which was a rarity indeed for the dwelling of the solitary wood-steward and keeper.

About the room were sitting and standing, in various gnarled attitudes, our old acquaintance, grandfathers James and William, the tranter, Mr. Penny, two or three children, including Jimmy and Charley, besides three or four country ladies and gentlemen from a greater distance who do not require any distinction by name. Geoffrey was seen and heard stamping about the outhouse and among the bushes of the garden, attending to details of daily routine before the proper time arrived for their performance, in order that they might be off his hands for the day. He appeared with his shirt-sleeves rolled up; his best new nether garments, in which he had arrayed himself that morning, being temporarily disguised under a weekday apron whilst these proceedings were in operation. He occasionally glanced at the hives in passing, to see if his wife’s bees were swarming, ultimately rolling down his shirt-sleeves and going indoors, talking to tranter Dewy whilst buttoning the wristbands, to save time; next going upstairs for his best waistcoat, and coming down again to make another remark

whilst buttoning that, during the time looking fixedly in the tranter's face as if he were a looking-glass.

The furniture had undergone attenuation to an alarming extent, every duplicate piece having been removed, including the clock by Thomas Wood; Ezekiel Saunders being at last left sole referee in matters of time.

Fancy was stationary upstairs, receiving her layers of clothes and adornments, and answering by short fragments of laughter which had more fidgetiness than mirth in them, remarks that were made from time to time by Mrs. Dewy and Mrs. Penny, who were assisting her at the toilet, Mrs. Day having pleaded a queerness in her head as a reason for shutting herself up in an inner bedroom for the whole morning. Mrs. Penny appeared with nine corkscrew curls on each side of her temples, and a back comb stuck upon her crown like a castle on a steep.

The conversation just now going on was concerning the banns, the last publication of which had been on the Sunday previous.

"And how did they sound?" Fancy subtly inquired.

"Very beautiful indeed," said Mrs. Penny. "I never heard any sound better."

"But how?"

"O, so natural and elegant, didn't they, Reuben!" she cried, through the chinks of the unceiled floor, to the tranter downstairs.

"What's that?" said the tranter, looking up inquiringly at the floor above him for an answer.

"Didn't Dick and Fancy sound well when they were called home in church last Sunday?" came downwards again in Mrs. Penny's voice.

"Ay, that they did, my sonnies! — especially the first time. There was a terrible whispering piece of work in the congregation, wasn't there, neighbour Penny?" said the tranter, taking up the thread of conversation on his own account and, in order to be heard in the room above, speaking very loud to Mr. Penny, who sat at the distance of three feet from him, or rather less.

"I never can mind seeing such a whispering as there was," said Mr. Penny, also loudly, to the room above. "And such sorrowful envy on the maidens' faces; really, I never did see such envy as there was!"

Fancy's lineaments varied in innumerable little flushes, and her heart palpitated innumerable little tremors of pleasure. "But perhaps," she said, with assumed indifference, "it was only because no religion was going on just then?"

"O, no; nothing to do with that. 'Twas because of your high standing in the parish. It was just as if they had one and all caught Dick kissing and coling ye to death, wasn't it, Mrs. Dewy?"

"Ay; that 'twas."

"How people will talk about one's doings!" Fancy exclaimed.

"Well, if you make songs about yourself, my dear, you can't blame other people for singing 'em."

“Mercy me! how shall I go through it?” said the young lady again, but merely to those in the bedroom, with a breathing of a kind between a sigh and a pant, round shining eyes, and warm face.

“O, you’ll get through it well enough, child,” said Mrs. Dewy placidly. “The edge of the performance is took off at the calling home; and when once you get up to the chancel end o’ the church, you feel as saucy as you please. I’m sure I felt as brave as a sodger all through the deed — though of course I dropped my face and looked modest, as was becoming to a maid. Mind you do that, Fancy.”

“And I walked into the church as quiet as a lamb, I’m sure,” subjoined Mrs. Penny. “There, you see Penny is such a little small man. But certainly, I was flurried in the inside o’ me. Well, thinks I, ‘tis to be, and here goes! And do you do the same: say, ‘Tis to be, and here goes!’”

“Is there such wonderful virtue in “Tis to be, and here goes!” inquired Fancy.

“Wonderful! ‘Twill carry a body through it all from wedding to churching, if you only let it out with spirit enough.”

“Very well, then,” said Fancy, blushing. “‘Tis to be, and here goes!”

“That’s a girl for a husband!” said Mrs. Dewy.

“I do hope he’ll come in time!” continued the bride-elect, inventing a new cause of affright, now that the other was demolished.

“‘Twould be a thousand pities if he didn’t come, now you be so brave,” said Mrs. Penny.

Grandfather James, having overheard some of these remarks, said downstairs with mischievous loudness —

“I’ve known some would-be weddings when the men didn’t come.”

“They’ve happened not to come, before now, certainly,” said Mr. Penny, cleaning one of the glasses of his spectacles.

“O, do hear what they are saying downstairs,” whispered Fancy. “Hush, hush!”

She listened.

“They have, haven’t they, Geoffrey?” continued grandfather James, as Geoffrey entered.

“Have what?” said Geoffrey.

“The men have been known not to come.”

“That they have,” said the keeper.

“Ay; I’ve knowed times when the wedding had to be put off through his not appearing, being tired of the woman. And another case I knowed was when the man was caught in a man-trap crossing Oaker’s Wood, and the three months had run out before he got well, and the banns had to be published over again.”

“How horrible!” said Fancy.

“They only say it on purpose to tease ‘ee, my dear,” said Mrs. Dewy.

“‘Tis quite sad to think what wretched shifts poor maids have been put to,” came again from downstairs. “Ye should hear Clerk Wilkins, my brother-law, tell his expe-

riences in marrying couples these last thirty year: sometimes one thing, sometimes another — 'tis quite heart-rending — enough to make your hair stand on end.”

“Those things don't happen very often, I know,” said Fancy, with smouldering uneasiness.

“Well, really 'tis time Dick was here,” said the tranter.

“Don't keep on at me so, grandfather James and Mr. Dewy, and all you down there!” Fancy broke out, unable to endure any longer. “I am sure I shall die, or do something, if you do!”

“Never you hearken to these old chaps, Miss Day!” cried Nat Callcome, the best man, who had just entered, and threw his voice upward through the chinks of the floor as the others had done. “'Tis all right; Dick's coming on like a wild feller; he'll be here in a minute. The hive o' bees his mother gie'd en for his new garden swarmed jist as he was starting, and he said, 'I can't afford to lose a stock o' bees; no, that I can't, though I fain would; and Fancy wouldn't wish it on any account.' So he jist stopped to ting to 'em and shake 'em.”

“A genuine wise man,” said Geoffrey.

“To be sure, what a day's work we had yesterday!” Mr. Callcome continued, lowering his voice as if it were not necessary any longer to include those in the room above among his audience, and selecting a remote corner of his best clean handkerchief for wiping his face. “To be sure!”

“Things so heavy, I suppose,” said Geoffrey, as if reading through the chimney-window from the far end of the vista.

“Ay,” said Nat, looking round the room at points from which furniture had been removed. “And so awkward to carry, too. 'Twas ath'art and across Dick's garden; in and out Dick's door; up and down Dick's stairs; round and round Dick's chammers till legs were worn to stumps: and Dick is so particular, too. And the stores of victuals and drink that lad has laid in: why, 'tis enough for Noah's ark! I'm sure I never wish to see a choicer half-dozen of hams than he's got there in his chimley; and the cider I tasted was a very pretty drop, indeed; — none could desire a prettier cider.”

“They be for the love and the stalled ox both. Ah, the greedy martels!” said grandfather James.

“Well, may-be they be. Surely,” says I, “that couple between 'em have heaped up so much furniture and victuals, that anybody would think they were going to take hold the big end of married life first, and begin wi' a grown-up family. Ah, what a bath of heat we two chaps were in, to be sure, a-getting that furniture in order!”

“I do so wish the room below was ceiled,” said Fancy, as the dressing went on; “we can hear all they say and do down there.”

“Hark! Who's that?” exclaimed a small pupil-teacher, who also assisted this morning, to her great delight. She ran half-way down the stairs, and peeped round the banister. “O, you should, you should, you should!” she exclaimed, scrambling up to the room again.

“What?” said Fancy.

“See the bridesmaids! They’ve just a come! ‘Tis wonderful, really! ‘tis wonderful how muslin can be brought to it. There, they don’t look a bit like themselves, but like some very rich sisters o’ theirs that nobody knew they had!”

“Make ‘em come up to me, make ‘em come up!” cried Fancy ecstatically; and the four damsels appointed, namely, Miss Susan Dewy, Miss Bessie Dewy, Miss Vashti Sniff, and Miss Mercy Onmey, surged upstairs, and floated along the passage.

“I wish Dick would come!” was again the burden of Fancy.

The same instant a small twig and flower from the creeper outside the door flew in at the open window, and a masculine voice said, “Ready, Fancy dearest?”

“There he is, he is!” cried Fancy, tittering spasmodically, and breathing as it were for the first time that morning.

The bridesmaids crowded to the window and turned their heads in the direction pointed out, at which motion eight earrings all swung as one: — not looking at Dick because they particularly wanted to see him, but with an important sense of their duty as obedient ministers of the will of that apotheosised being — the Bride.

“He looks very taking!” said Miss Vashti Sniff, a young lady who blushed cream-colour and wore yellow bonnet ribbons.

Dick was advancing to the door in a painfully new coat of shining cloth, primrose-coloured waistcoat, hat of the same painful style of newness, and with an extra quantity of whiskers shaved off his face, and hair cut to an unwonted shortness in honour of the occasion.

“Now, I’ll run down,” said Fancy, looking at herself over her shoulder in the glass, and flitting off.

“O Dick!” she exclaimed, “I am so glad you are come! I knew you would, of course, but I thought, Oh if you shouldn’t!”

“Not come, Fancy! Het or wet, blow or snow, here come I to-day! Why, what’s possessing your little soul? You never used to mind such things a bit.”

“Ah, Mr. Dick, I hadn’t hoisted my colours and committed myself then!” said Fancy.

“‘Tis a pity I can’t marry the whole five of ye!” said Dick, surveying them all round.

“Heh-heh-heh!” laughed the four bridesmaids, and Fancy privately touched Dick and smoothed him down behind his shoulder, as if to assure herself that he was there in flesh and blood as her own property.

“Well, whoever would have thought such a thing?” said Dick, taking off his hat, sinking into a chair, and turning to the elder members of the company.

The latter arranged their eyes and lips to signify that in their opinion nobody could have thought such a thing, whatever it was.

“That my bees should ha’ swarmed just then, of all times and seasons!” continued Dick, throwing a comprehensive glance like a net over the whole auditory. “And ‘tis a fine swarm, too: I haven’t seen such a fine swarm for these ten years.”

“A’ excellent sign,” said Mrs. Penny, from the depths of experience. “A’ excellent sign.”

“I am glad everything seems so right,” said Fancy with a breath of relief.

“And so am I,” said the four bridesmaids with much sympathy.

“Well, bees can’t be put off,” observed the inharmonious grandfather James. “Marrying a woman is a thing you can do at any moment; but a swarm o’ bees won’t come for the asking.”

Dick fanned himself with his hat. “I can’t think,” he said thoughtfully, “whatever ‘twas I did to offend Mr. Maybold, a man I like so much too. He rather took to me when he came first, and used to say he should like to see me married, and that he’d marry me, whether the young woman I chose lived in his parish or no. I just hinted to him of it when I put in the banns, but he didn’t seem to take kindly to the notion now, and so I said no more. I wonder how it was.”

“I wonder!” said Fancy, looking into vacancy with those beautiful eyes of hers — too refined and beautiful for a tranter’s wife; but, perhaps, not too good.

“Altered his mind, as folks will, I suppose,” said the tranter. “Well, my sonnies, there’ll be a good strong party looking at us to-day as we go along.”

“And the body of the church,” said Geoffrey, “will be lined with females, and a row of young fellers’ heads, as far down as the eyes, will be noticed just above the sills of the chancel-winders.”

“Ay, you’ve been through it twice,” said Reuben, “and well mid know.”

“I can put up with it for once,” said Dick, “or twice either, or a dozen times.”

“O Dick!” said Fancy reproachfully.

“Why, dear, that’s nothing, — only just a bit of a flourish. You be as nervous as a cat to-day.”

“And then, of course, when ‘tis all over,” continued the tranter, “we shall march two and two round the parish.”

“Yes, sure,” said Mr. Penny: “two and two: every man hitched up to his woman, ‘a b’lieve.”

“I never can make a show of myself in that way!” said Fancy, looking at Dick to ascertain if he could.

“I’m agreed to anything you and the company like, my dear!” said Mr. Richard Dewy heartily.

“Why, we did when we were married, didn’t we, Ann?” said the tranter; “and so do everybody, my sonnies.”

“And so did we,” said Fancy’s father.

“And so did Penny and I,” said Mrs. Penny: “I wore my best Bath clogs, I remember, and Penny was cross because it made me look so tall.”

“And so did father and mother,” said Miss Mercy Onmey.

“And I mean to, come next Christmas!” said Nat the groomsman vigorously, and looking towards the person of Miss Vashti Sniff.

“Respectable people don’t nowadays,” said Fancy. “Still, since poor mother did, I will.”

“Ay,” resumed the tranter, “‘twas on a White Tuesday when I committed it. Mellstock Club walked the same day, and we new-married folk went a-gaying round the

parish behind ‘em. Everybody used to wear something white at Whitsuntide in them days. My sonnies, I’ve got the very white trousers that I wore, at home in box now. Ha’n’t I, Ann?”

“You had till I cut ‘em up for Jimmy,” said Mrs. Dewy.

“And we ought, by rights, after doing this parish, to go round Higher and Lower Mellstock, and call at Viney’s, and so work our way hither again across He’th,” said Mr. Penny, recovering scent of the matter in hand. “Dairyman Viney is a very respectable man, and so is Farmer Kex, and we ought to show ourselves to them.”

“True,” said the tranter, “we ought to go round Mellstock to do the thing well. We shall form a very striking object walking along in rotation, good-now, neighbours?”

“That we shall: a proper pretty sight for the nation,” said Mrs. Penny.

“Hullo!” said the tranter, suddenly catching sight of a singular human figure standing in the doorway, and wearing a long smock-frock of pillow-case cut and of snowy whiteness. “Why, Leaf! whatever dost thou do here?”

“I’ve come to know if so be I can come to the wedding — hee-hee!” said Leaf in a voice of timidity.

“Now, Leaf,” said the tranter reproachfully, “you know we don’t want ‘ee here to-day: we’ve got no room for ye, Leaf.”

“Thomas Leaf, Thomas Leaf, fie upon ye for prying!” said old William.

“I know I’ve got no head, but I thought, if I washed and put on a clane shirt and smock-frock, I might just call,” said Leaf, turning away disappointed and trembling.

“Poor feller!” said the tranter, turning to Geoffrey. “Suppose we must let en come? His looks are rather against en, and he is terrible silly; but ‘a have never been in jail, and ‘a won’t do no harm.”

Leaf looked with gratitude at the tranter for these praises, and then anxiously at Geoffrey, to see what effect they would have in helping his cause.

“Ay, let en come,” said Geoffrey decisively. “Leaf, th’rt welcome, ‘st know;” and Leaf accordingly remained.

They were now all ready for leaving the house, and began to form a procession in the following order: Fancy and her father, Dick and Susan Dewy, Nat Callcome and Vashti Sniff, Ted Waywood and Mercy Onmey, and Jimmy and Bessie Dewy. These formed the executive, and all appeared in strict wedding attire. Then came the tranter and Mrs. Dewy, and last of all Mr. and Mrs. Penny; — the tranter conspicuous by his enormous gloves, size eleven and three-quarters, which appeared at a distance like boxing gloves bleached, and sat rather awkwardly upon his brown hands; this hall-mark of respectability having been set upon himself to-day (by Fancy’s special request) for the first time in his life.

“The proper way is for the bridesmaids to walk together,” suggested Fancy.

“What? ‘Twas always young man and young woman, arm in crook, in my time!” said Geoffrey, astounded.

“And in mine!” said the tranter.

“And in ours!” said Mr. and Mrs. Penny.

“Never heard o’ such a thing as woman and woman!” said old William; who, with grandfather James and Mrs. Day, was to stay at home.

“Whichever way you and the company like, my dear!” said Dick, who, being on the point of securing his right to Fancy, seemed willing to renounce all other rights in the world with the greatest pleasure. The decision was left to Fancy.

“Well, I think I’d rather have it the way mother had it,” she said, and the couples moved along under the trees, every man to his maid.

“Ah!” said grandfather James to grandfather William as they retired, “I wonder which she thinks most about, Dick or her wedding raiment!”

“Well, ‘tis their nature,” said grandfather William. “Remember the words of the prophet Jeremiah: ‘Can a maid forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire?’”

Now among dark perpendicular firs, like the shafted columns of a cathedral; now through a hazel copse, matted with primroses and wild hyacinths; now under broad beeches in bright young leaves they threaded their way into the high road over Yalbury Hill, which dipped at that point directly into the village of Geoffrey Day’s parish; and in the space of a quarter of an hour Fancy found herself to be Mrs. Richard Dewy, though, much to her surprise, feeling no other than Fancy Day still.

On the circuitous return walk through the lanes and fields, amid much chattering and laughter, especially when they came to stiles, Dick discerned a brown spot far up a turnip field.

“Why, ‘tis Enoch!” he said to Fancy. “I thought I missed him at the house this morning. How is it he’s left you?”

“He drank too much cider, and it got into his head, and they put him in Weatherbury stocks for it. Father was obliged to get somebody else for a day or two, and Enoch hasn’t had anything to do with the woods since.”

“We might ask him to call down to-night. Stocks are nothing for once, considering ‘tis our wedding day.” The bridal party was ordered to halt.

“Eno-o-o-o-ch!” cried Dick at the top of his voice.

“Y-a-a-a-a-as!” said Enoch from the distance.

“D’ye know who I be-e-e-e-e?”

“No-o-o-o-o-o-o!”

“Dick Dew-w-w-w-wy!”

“O-h-h-h-h-h!”

“Just a-ma-a-a-a-arried!”

“O-h-h-h-h-h!”

“This is my wife, Fa-a-a-a-a-ancy!” (holding her up to Enoch’s view as if she had been a nosegay.)

“O-h-h-h-h-h!”

“Will ye come across to the party to-ni-i-i-i-i-ight!”

“Ca-a-a-a-a-an’t!”

“Why n-o-o-o-o-ot?”

“Don’t work for the family no-o-o-o-ow!”

“Not nice of Master Enoch,” said Dick, as they resumed their walk.

“You mustn’t blame en,” said Geoffrey; “the man’s not hisself now; he’s in his morning frame of mind. When he’s had a gallon o’ cider or ale, or a pint or two of mead, the man’s well enough, and his manners be as good as anybody’s in the kingdom.”

CHAPTER II:

UNDER THE GREENWOOD TREE

The point in Yalbury Wood which abutted on the end of Geoffrey Day’s premises was closed with an ancient tree, horizontally of enormous extent, though having no great pretensions to height. Many hundreds of birds had been born amidst the boughs of this single tree; tribes of rabbits and hares had nibbled at its bark from year to year; quaint tufts of fungi had sprung from the cavities of its forks; and countless families of moles and earthworms had crept about its roots. Beneath and beyond its shade spread a carefully-tended grass-plot, its purpose being to supply a healthy exercise-ground for young chickens and pheasants; the hens, their mothers, being enclosed in coops placed upon the same green flooring.

All these encumbrances were now removed, and as the afternoon advanced, the guests gathered on the spot, where music, dancing, and the singing of songs went forward with great spirit throughout the evening. The propriety of every one was intense by reason of the influence of Fancy, who, as an additional precaution in this direction, had strictly charged her father and the tranter to carefully avoid saying ‘thee’ and ‘thou’ in their conversation, on the plea that those ancient words sounded so very humiliating to persons of newer taste; also that they were never to be seen drawing the back of the hand across the mouth after drinking — a local English custom of extraordinary antiquity, but stated by Fancy to be decidedly dying out among the better classes of society.

In addition to the local musicians present, a man who had a thorough knowledge of the tambourine was invited from the village of Tantrum Clangley, — a place long celebrated for the skill of its inhabitants as performers on instruments of percussion. These important members of the assembly were relegated to a height of two or three feet from the ground, upon a temporary erection of planks supported by barrels. Whilst the dancing progressed the older persons sat in a group under the trunk of the tree, — the space being allotted to them somewhat grudgingly by the young ones, who were greedy of pirouetting room, — and fortified by a table against the heels of the dancers. Here the gaffers and gammers, whose dancing days were over, told stories of great impressiveness, and at intervals surveyed the advancing and retiring couples from the same retreat, as people on shore might be supposed to survey a naval engagement in the bay beyond; returning again to their tales when the pause was over. Those of the whirling throng, who, during the rests between each figure, turned their eyes in the direction of these seated ones, were only able to discover, on account of the music and

bustle, that a very striking circumstance was in course of narration — denoted by an emphatic sweep of the hand, snapping of the fingers, close of the lips, and fixed look into the centre of the listener's eye for the space of a quarter of a minute, which raised in that listener such a reciprocating working of face as to sometimes make the distant dancers half wish to know what such an interesting tale could refer to.

Fancy caused her looks to wear as much matronly expression as was obtainable out of six hours' experience as a wife, in order that the contrast between her own state of life and that of the unmarried young women present might be duly impressed upon the company: occasionally stealing glances of admiration at her left hand, but this quite privately; for her ostensible bearing concerning the matter was intended to show that, though she undoubtedly occupied the most wondrous position in the eyes of the world that had ever been attained, she was almost unconscious of the circumstance, and that the somewhat prominent position in which that wonderfully-emblazoned left hand was continually found to be placed, when handing cups and saucers, knives, forks, and glasses, was quite the result of accident. As to wishing to excite envy in the bosoms of her maiden companions, by the exhibition of the shining ring, every one was to know it was quite foreign to the dignity of such an experienced married woman. Dick's imagination in the meantime was far less capable of drawing so much wantedness from his new condition. He had been for two or three hours trying to feel himself merely a newly-married man, but had been able to get no further in the attempt than to realise that he was Dick Dewy, the tranter's son, at a party given by Lord Wessex's head man-in-charge, on the outlying Yalbury estate, dancing and chatting with Fancy Day.

Five country dances, including 'Haste to the Wedding,' two reels, and three fragments of horn-pipes, brought them to the time for supper, which, on account of the dampness of the grass from the immaturity of the summer season, was spread indoors. At the conclusion of the meal Dick went out to put the horse in; and Fancy, with the elder half of the four bridesmaids, retired upstairs to dress for the journey to Dick's new cottage near Mellstock.

"How long will you be putting on your bonnet, Fancy?" Dick inquired at the foot of the staircase. Being now a man of business and married, he was strong on the importance of time, and doubled the emphasis of his words in conversing, and added vigour to his nods.

"Only a minute."

"How long is that?"

"Well, dear, five."

"Ah, sonnies!" said the tranter, as Dick retired, "'tis a talent of the female race that low numbers should stand for high, more especially in matters of waiting, matters of age, and matters of money."

"True, true, upon my body," said Geoffrey.

"Ye spak with feeling, Geoffrey, seemingly."

"Anybody that d'know my experience might guess that."

"What's she doing now, Geoffrey?"

“Claning out all the upstairs drawers and cupboards, and dusting the second-best chainey — a thing that’s only done once a year. ‘If there’s work to be done I must do it,’ says she, ‘wedding or no.’”

“‘Tis my belief she’s a very good woman at bottom.”

“She’s terrible deep, then.”

Mrs. Penny turned round. “Well, ‘tis humps and hollers with the best of us; but still and for all that, Dick and Fancy stand as fair a chance of having a bit of sunsheen as any married pair in the land.”

“Ay, there’s no gainsaying it.”

Mrs. Dewy came up, talking to one person and looking at another. “Happy, yes,” she said. “‘Tis always so when a couple is so exactly in tune with one another as Dick and she.”

“When they be’n’t too poor to have time to sing,” said grandfather James.

“I tell ye, neighbours, when the pinch comes,” said the tranter: “when the oldest daughter’s boots be only a size less than her mother’s, and the rest o’ the flock close behind her. A sharp time for a man that, my sonnies; a very sharp time! Chanticleer’s comb is a-cut then, ‘a believe.”

“That’s about the form o’t,” said Mr. Penny. “That’ll put the stuns upon a man, when you must measure mother and daughter’s lasts to tell ‘em apart.”

“You’ve no cause to complain, Reuben, of such a close-coming flock,” said Mrs. Dewy; “for ours was a stragglin’ lot enough, God knows!”

“I d’know it, I d’know it,” said the tranter. “You be a well-enough woman, Ann.”

Mrs. Dewy put her mouth in the form of a smile, and put it back again without smiling.

“And if they come together, they go together,” said Mrs. Penny, whose family had been the reverse of the tranter’s; “and a little money will make either fate tolerable. And money can be made by our young couple, I know.”

“Yes, that it can!” said the impulsive voice of Leaf, who had hitherto humbly admired the proceedings from a corner. “It can be done — all that’s wanted is a few pounds to begin with. That’s all! I know a story about it!”

“Let’s hear thy story, Leaf,” said the tranter. “I never knew you were clever enough to tell a story. Silence, all of ye! Mr. Leaf will tell a story.”

“Tell your story, Thomas Leaf,” said grandfather William in the tone of a school-master.

“Once,” said the delighted Leaf, in an uncertain voice, “there was a man who lived in a house! Well, this man went thinking and thinking night and day. At last, he said to himself, as I might, ‘If I had only ten pound, I’d make a fortune.’ At last by hook or by crook, behold he got the ten pounds!”

“Only think of that!” said Nat Callcome satirically.

“Silence!” said the tranter.

“Well, now comes the interesting part of the story! In a little time he made that ten pounds twenty. Then a little time after that he doubled it, and made it forty. Well, he

went on, and a good while after that he made it eighty, and on to a hundred. Well, by-and-by he made it two hundred! Well, you'd never believe it, but — he went on and made it four hundred! He went on, and what did he do? Why, he made it eight hundred! Yes, he did," continued Leaf, in the highest pitch of excitement, bringing down his fist upon his knee with such force that he quivered with the pain; "yes, and he went on and made it A THOUSAND!"

"Hear, hear!" said the tranter. "Better than the history of England, my sonnies!"

"Thank you for your story, Thomas Leaf," said grandfather William; and then Leaf gradually sank into nothingness again.

Amid a medley of laughter, old shoes, and elder-wine, Dick and his bride took their departure, side by side in the excellent new spring-cart which the young tranter now possessed. The moon was just over the full, rendering any light from lamps or their own beauties quite unnecessary to the pair. They drove slowly along Yalbury Bottom, where the road passed between two copses. Dick was talking to his companion.

"Fancy," he said, "why we are so happy is because there is such full confidence between us. Ever since that time you confessed to that little flirtation with Shiner by the river (which was really no flirtation at all), I have thought how artless and good you must be to tell me o' such a trifling thing, and to be so frightened about it as you were. It has won me to tell you my every deed and word since then. We'll have no secrets from each other, darling, will we ever? — no secret at all."

"None from to-day," said Fancy. "Hark! what's that?"

From a neighbouring thicket was suddenly heard to issue in a loud, musical, and liquid voice —

"Tippiwit! swe-e-et! ki-ki-ki! Come hither, come hither, come hither!"

"O, 'tis the nightingale," murmured she, and thought of a secret she would never tell.

A PAIR OF BLUE EYES

A Pair of Blue Eyes was published in 1873 and concerns a love triangle between a young woman, Elfride Swancourt, and her two suitors from opposing backgrounds. Stephen Smith is a socially inferior but ambitious young man who adores her and with whom she shares a country background. Henry Knight is the respectable, established, older man who represents London society.

This was the third of Hardy's novels to be published and the first to bear his name. Interestingly, the term "cliffhanger" is thought to have originated from this novel, which was first serialised in Tinsley's Magazine between September 1872 and July 1873. At one stage Hardy leaves Henry Knight literally hanging off a cliff in peril.

Hardy in a personal portrait, 1926

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A PAIR OF BLUE EYES

‘A violet in the youth of primy nature,
 Forward, not permanent, sweet not lasting,
 The perfume and suppliance of a minute;
 No more.’

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 carcasses 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-board 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 gigo 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: 'tisin't two years; for they don't scandalise him yet; and, as a rule, a parish begins to scandalise 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 maternally 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 furthestmost 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 chimney-piece 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, ‘tishn’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 moralising 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 *rencontre*, 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 blushing 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 tantaliser, 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 curtsied 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 vil-lager’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 curtsied 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 curtsying 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.’

‘No; I won’t think of him so,’ said Stephen. ‘If I appear before him some time hence as a man of established name, he will accept me — I know he will. He is not a wicked man.’

‘No, he is not wicked. But you say “some time hence,” as if it were no time. To you, among bustle and excitement, it will be comparatively a short time, perhaps; oh, to me, it will be its real length trebled! Every summer will be a year — autumn a year — winter a year! O Stephen! and you may forget me!’

Forget: that was, and is, the real sting of waiting to fond-hearted woman. The remark awoke in Stephen the converse fear. ‘You, too, may be persuaded to give me up, when time has made me fainter in your memory. For, remember, your love for me must be nourished in secret; there will be no long visits from me to support you. Circumstances will always tend to obliterate me.’

‘Stephen,’ she said, filled with her own misgivings, and unheeding his last words, ‘there are beautiful women where you live — of course I know there are — and they

may win you away from me.' Her tears came visibly as she drew a mental picture of his faithlessness. 'And it won't be your fault,' she continued, looking into the candle with doleful eyes. 'No! You will think that our family don't want you, and get to include me with them. And there will be a vacancy in your heart, and some others will be let in.'

'I could not, I would not. Elfie, do not be so full of forebodings.'

'Oh yes, they will,' she replied. 'And you will look at them, not caring at first, and then you will look and be interested, and after a while you will think, "Ah, they know all about city life, and assemblies, and coteries, and the manners of the titled, and poor little Elfie, with all the fuss that's made about her having me, doesn't know about anything but a little house and a few cliffs and a space of sea, far away." And then you'll be more interested in them, and they'll make you have them instead of me, on purpose to be cruel to me because I am silly, and they are clever and hate me. And I hate them, too; yes, I do!'

Her impulsive words had power to impress him at any rate with the recognition of the uncertainty of all that is not accomplished. And, worse than that general feeling, there of course remained the sadness which arose from the special features of his own case. However remote a desired issue may be, the mere fact of having entered the groove which leads to it, cheers to some extent with a sense of accomplishment. Had Mr. Swancourt consented to an engagement of no less length than ten years, Stephen would have been comparatively cheerful in waiting; they would have felt that they were somewhere on the road to Cupid's garden. But, with a possibility of a shorter probation, they had not as yet any prospect of the beginning; the zero of hope had yet to be reached. Mr. Swancourt would have to revoke his formidable words before the waiting for marriage could even set in. And this was despair.

'I wish we could marry now,' murmured Stephen, as an impossible fancy.

'So do I,' said she also, as if regarding an idle dream. "'Tis the only thing that ever does sweethearts good!'

'Secretly would do, would it not, Elfie?'

'Yes, secretly would do; secretly would indeed be best,' she said, and went on reflectively: 'All we want is to render it absolutely impossible for any future circumstance to upset our future intention of being happy together; not to begin being happy now.'

'Exactly,' he murmured in a voice and manner the counterpart of hers. 'To marry and part secretly, and live on as we are living now; merely to put it out of anybody's power to force you away from me, dearest.'

'Or you away from me, Stephen.'

'Or me from you. It is possible to conceive a force of circumstance strong enough to make any woman in the world marry against her will: no conceivable pressure, up to torture or starvation, can make a woman once married to her lover anybody else's wife.'

Now up to this point the idea of an immediate secret marriage had been held by both as an untenable hypothesis, wherewith simply to beguile a miserable moment.

During a pause which followed Stephen's last remark, a fascinating perception, then an alluring conviction, flashed along the brain of both. The perception was that an immediate marriage COULD be contrived; the conviction that such an act, in spite of its daring, its fathomless results, its deceptiveness, would be preferred by each to the life they must lead under any other conditions.

The youth spoke first, and his voice trembled with the magnitude of the conception he was cherishing. 'How strong we should feel, Elfride! going on our separate courses as before, without the fear of ultimate separation! O Elfride! think of it; think of it!'

It is certain that the young girl's love for Stephen received a fanning from her father's opposition which made it blaze with a dozen times the intensity it would have exhibited if left alone. Never were conditions more favourable for developing a girl's first passing fancy for a handsome boyish face — a fancy rooted in inexperience and nourished by seclusion — into a wild unreflecting passion fervid enough for anything. All the elements of such a development were there, the chief one being hopelessness — a necessary ingredient always to perfect the mixture of feelings united under the name of loving to distraction.

'We would tell papa soon, would we not?' she inquired timidly. 'Nobody else need know. He would then be convinced that hearts cannot be played with; love encouraged be ready to grow, love discouraged be ready to die, at a moment's notice. Stephen, do you not think that if marriages against a parent's consent are ever justifiable, they are when young people have been favoured up to a point, as we have, and then have had that favour suddenly withdrawn?'

'Yes. It is not as if we had from the beginning acted in opposition to your papa's wishes. Only think, Elfie, how pleasant he was towards me but six hours ago! He liked me, praised me, never objected to my being alone with you.'

'I believe he MUST like you now,' she cried. 'And if he found that you irremediably belonged to me, he would own it and help you. 'O Stephen, Stephen,' she burst out again, as the remembrance of his packing came afresh to her mind, 'I cannot bear your going away like this! It is too dreadful. All I have been expecting miserably killed within me like this!'

Stephen flushed hot with impulse. 'I will not be a doubt to you — thought of you shall not be a misery to me!' he said. 'We will be wife and husband before we part for long!'

She hid her face on his shoulder. 'Anything to make SURE!' she whispered.

'I did not like to propose it immediately,' continued Stephen. 'It seemed to me — it seems to me now — like trying to catch you — a girl better in the world than I.'

'Not that, indeed! And am I better in worldly station? What's the use of have beens? We may have been something once; we are nothing now.'

Then they whispered long and earnestly together; Stephen hesitatingly proposing this and that plan, Elfride modifying them, with quick breathings, and hectic flush, and unnaturally bright eyes. It was two o'clock before an arrangement was finally concluded.

She then told him to leave her, giving him his light to go up to his own room. They parted with an agreement not to meet again in the morning. After his door had been some time closed he heard her softly gliding into her chamber.

CHAPTER XI

‘Journeys end in lovers meeting.’

Stephen lay watching the Great Bear; Elfride was regarding a monotonous parallelogram of window blind. Neither slept that night.

Early the next morning — that is to say, four hours after their stolen interview, and just as the earliest servant was heard moving about — Stephen Smith went downstairs, portmanteau in hand. Throughout the night he had intended to see Mr. Swancourt again, but the sharp rebuff of the previous evening rendered such an interview particularly distasteful. Perhaps there was another and less honest reason. He decided to put it off. Whatever of moral timidity or obliquity may have lain in such a decision, no perception of it was strong enough to detain him. He wrote a note in his room, which stated simply that he did not feel happy in the house after Mr. Swancourt’s sudden veto on what he had favoured a few hours before; but that he hoped a time would come, and that soon, when his original feelings of pleasure as Mr. Swancourt’s guest might be recovered.

He expected to find the downstairs rooms wearing the gray and cheerless aspect that early morning gives to everything out of the sun. He found in the dining room a breakfast laid, of which somebody had just partaken.

Stephen gave the maid-servant his note of adieu. She stated that Mr. Swancourt had risen early that morning, and made an early breakfast. He was not going away that she knew of.

Stephen took a cup of coffee, left the house of his love, and turned into the lane. It was so early that the shaded places still smelt like night time, and the sunny spots had hardly felt the sun. The horizontal rays made every shallow dip in the ground to show as a well-marked hollow. Even the channel of the path was enough to throw shade, and the very stones of the road cast tapering dashes of darkness westward, as long as Jael’s tent-nail.

At a spot not more than a hundred yards from the vicar’s residence the lane leading thence crossed the high road. Stephen reached the point of intersection, stood still and listened. Nothing could be heard save the lengthy, murmuring line of the sea upon the adjacent shore. He looked at his watch, and then mounted a gate upon which he seated himself, to await the arrival of the carrier. Whilst he sat he heard wheels coming in two directions.

The vehicle approaching on his right he soon recognized as the carrier’s. There were the accompanying sounds of the owner’s voice and the smack of his whip, distinct in the still morning air, by which he encouraged his horses up the hill.

The other set of wheels sounded from the lane Stephen had just traversed. On closer observation, he perceived that they were moving from the precincts of the ancient manor-house adjoining the vicarage grounds. A carriage then left the entrance gates of the house, and wheeling round came fully in sight. It was a plain travelling carriage, with a small quantity of luggage, apparently a lady's. The vehicle came to the junction of the four ways half-a-minute before the carrier reached the same spot, and crossed directly in his front, proceeding by the lane on the other side.

Inside the carriage Stephen could just discern an elderly lady with a younger woman, who seemed to be her maid. The road they had taken led to Stratleigh, a small watering-place sixteen miles north.

He heard the manor-house gates swing again, and looking up saw another person leaving them, and walking off in the direction of the parsonage. 'Ah, how much I wish I were moving that way!' felt he parenthetically. The gentleman was tall, and resembled Mr. Swancourt in outline and attire. He opened the vicarage gate and went in. Mr. Swancourt, then, it certainly was. Instead of remaining in bed that morning Mr. Swancourt must have taken it into his head to see his new neighbour off on a journey. He must have been greatly interested in that neighbour to do such an unusual thing.

The carrier's conveyance had pulled up, and Stephen now handed in his portmanteau and mounted the shafts. 'Who is that lady in the carriage?' he inquired indifferently of Lickpan the carrier.

'That, sir, is Mrs. Troyton, a widder wi' a mint o' money. She's the owner of all that part of Endelstow that is not Lord Luxellian's. Only been here a short time; she came into it by law. The owner formerly was a terrible mysterious party — never lived here — hardly ever was seen here except in the month of September, as I might say.'

The horses were started again, and noise rendered further discourse a matter of too great exertion. Stephen crept inside under the tilt, and was soon lost in reverie.

Three hours and a half of straining up hills and jogging down brought them to St. Launce's, the market town and railway station nearest to Endelstow, and the place from which Stephen Smith had journeyed over the downs on the, to him, memorable winter evening at the beginning of the same year. The carrier's van was so timed as to meet a starting up-train, which Stephen entered. Two or three hours' railway travel through vertical cuttings in metamorphic rock, through oak copses rich and green, stretching over slopes and down delightful valleys, glens, and ravines, sparkling with water like many-rilled Ida, and he plunged amid the hundred and fifty thousand people composing the town of Plymouth.

There being some time upon his hands he left his luggage at the cloak-room, and went on foot along Bedford Street to the nearest church. Here Stephen wandered among the multifarious tombstones and looked in at the chancel window, dreaming of something that was likely to happen by the altar there in the course of the coming month. He turned away and ascended the Hoe, viewed the magnificent stretch of sea and massive promontories of land, but without particularly discerning one feature of the varied perspective. He still saw that inner prospect — the event he hoped for in

yonder church. The wide Sound, the Breakwater, the light-house on far-off Eddystone, the dark steam vessels, brigs, barques, and schooners, either floating stilly, or gliding with tiniest motion, were as the dream, then; the dreamed-of event was as the reality.

Soon Stephen went down from the Hoe, and returned to the railway station. He took his ticket, and entered the London train.

That day was an irksome time at Endelstow vicarage. Neither father nor daughter alluded to the departure of Stephen. Mr. Swancourt's manner towards her partook of the compunctious kindness that arises from a misgiving as to the justice of some previous act.

Either from lack of the capacity to grasp the whole coup d'oeil, or from a natural endowment for certain kinds of stoicism, women are cooler than men in critical situations of the passive form. Probably, in Elfride's case at least, it was blindness to the greater contingencies of the future she was preparing for herself, which enabled her to ask her father in a quiet voice if he could give her a holiday soon, to ride to St. Launce's and go on to Plymouth.

Now, she had only once before gone alone to Plymouth, and that was in consequence of some unavoidable difficulty. Being a country girl, and a good, not to say a wild, horsewoman, it had been her delight to canter, without the ghost of an attendant, over the fourteen or sixteen miles of hard road intervening between their home and the station at St. Launce's, put up the horse, and go on the remainder of the distance by train, returning in the same manner in the evening. It was then resolved that, though she had successfully accomplished this journey once, it was not to be repeated without some attendance.

But Elfride must not be confounded with ordinary young feminine equestrians. The circumstances of her lonely and narrow life made it imperative that in trotting about the neighbourhood she must trot alone or else not at all. Usage soon rendered this perfectly natural to herself. Her father, who had had other experiences, did not much like the idea of a Swancourt, whose pedigree could be as distinctly traced as a thread in a skein of silk, scampering over the hills like a farmer's daughter, even though he could habitually neglect her. But what with his not being able to afford her a regular attendant, and his inveterate habit of letting anything be to save himself trouble, the circumstance grew customary. And so there arose a chronic notion in the villagers' minds that all ladies rode without an attendant, like Miss Swancourt, except a few who were sometimes visiting at Lord Luxellian's.

'I don't like your going to Plymouth alone, particularly going to St. Launce's on horseback. Why not drive, and take the man?'

'It is not nice to be so overlooked.' Worm's company would not seriously have interfered with her plans, but it was her humour to go without him.

'When do you want to go?' said her father.

She only answered, 'Soon.'

'I will consider,' he said.

Only a few days elapsed before she asked again. A letter had reached her from Stephen. It had been timed to come on that day by special arrangement between them. In it he named the earliest morning on which he could meet her at Plymouth. Her father had been on a journey to Stratleigh, and returned in unusual buoyancy of spirit. It was a good opportunity; and since the dismissal of Stephen her father had been generally in a mood to make small concessions, that he might steer clear of large ones connected with that outcast lover of hers.

‘Next Thursday week I am going from home in a different direction,’ said her father. ‘In fact, I shall leave home the night before. You might choose the same day, for they wish to take up the carpets, or some such thing, I think. As I said, I don’t like you to be seen in a town on horseback alone; but go if you will.’

Thursday week. Her father had named the very day that Stephen also had named that morning as the earliest on which it would be of any use to meet her; that was, about fifteen days from the day on which he had left Endelstow. Fifteen days — that fragment of duration which has acquired such an interesting individuality from its connection with the English marriage law.

She involuntarily looked at her father so strangely, that on becoming conscious of the look she paled with embarrassment. Her father, too, looked confused. What was he thinking of?

There seemed to be a special facility offered her by a power external to herself in the circumstance that Mr. Swancourt had proposed to leave home the night previous to her wished-for day. Her father seldom took long journeys; seldom slept from home except perhaps on the night following a remote Visitation. Well, she would not inquire too curiously into the reason of the opportunity, nor did he, as would have been natural, proceed to explain it of his own accord. In matters of fact there had hitherto been no reserve between them, though they were not usually confidential in its full sense. But the divergence of their emotions on Stephen’s account had produced an estrangement which just at present went even to the extent of reticence on the most ordinary household topics.

Elfride was almost unconsciously relieved, persuading herself that her father’s reserve on his business justified her in secrecy as regarded her own — a secrecy which was necessarily a foregone decision with her. So anxious is a young conscience to discover a palliative, that the ex post facto nature of a reason is of no account in excluding it.

The intervening fortnight was spent by her mostly in walking by herself among the shrubs and trees, indulging sometimes in sanguine anticipations; more, far more frequently, in misgivings. All her flowers seemed dull of hue; her pets seemed to look wistfully into her eyes, as if they no longer stood in the same friendly relation to her as formerly. She wore melancholy jewellery, gazed at sunsets, and talked to old men and women. It was the first time that she had had an inner and private world apart from the visible one about her. She wished that her father, instead of neglecting her even more than usual, would make some advance — just one word; she would then tell all, and risk Stephen’s displeasure. Thus brought round to the youth again, she

saw him in her fancy, standing, touching her, his eyes full of sad affection, hopelessly renouncing his attempt because she had renounced hers; and she could not recede.

On the Wednesday she was to receive another letter. She had resolved to let her father see the arrival of this one, be the consequences what they might: the dread of losing her lover by this deed of honesty prevented her acting upon the resolve. Five minutes before the postman's expected arrival she slipped out, and down the lane to meet him. She met him immediately upon turning a sharp angle, which hid her from view in the direction of the vicarage. The man smilingly handed one missive, and was going on to hand another, a circular from some tradesman.

'No,' she said; 'take that on to the house.'

'Why, miss, you are doing what your father has done for the last fortnight.'

She did not comprehend.

'Why, come to this corner, and take a letter of me every morning, all writ in the same handwriting, and letting any others for him go on to the house.' And on the postman went.

No sooner had he turned the corner behind her back than she heard her father meet and address the man. She had saved her letter by two minutes. Her father audibly went through precisely the same performance as she had just been guilty of herself.

This stealthy conduct of his was, to say the least, peculiar.

Given an impulsive inconsequent girl, neglected as to her inner life by her only parent, and the following forces alive within her; to determine a resultant:

First love acted upon by a deadly fear of separation from its object: inexperience, guiding onward a frantic wish to prevent the above-named issue: misgivings as to propriety, met by hope of ultimate exoneration: indignation at parental inconsistency in first encouraging, then forbidding: a chilling sense of disobedience, overpowered by a conscientious inability to brook a breaking of plighted faith with a man who, in essentials, had remained unaltered from the beginning: a blessed hope that opposition would turn an erroneous judgement: a bright faith that things would mend thereby, and wind up well.

Probably the result would, after all, have been nil, had not the following few remarks been made one day at breakfast.

Her father was in his old hearty spirits. He smiled to himself at stories too bad to tell, and called Elfrida a little scamp for surreptitiously preserving some blind kittens that ought to have been drowned. After this expression, she said to him suddenly:

'If Mr. Smith had been already in the family, you would not have been made wretched by discovering he had poor relations?'

'Do you mean in the family by marriage?' he replied inattentively, and continuing to peel his egg.

The accumulating scarlet told that was her meaning, as much as the affirmative reply.

'I should have put up with it, no doubt,' Mr. Swancourt observed.

‘So that you would not have been driven into hopeless melancholy, but have made the best of him?’

Elfride’s erratic mind had from her youth upwards been constantly in the habit of perplexing her father by hypothetical questions, based on absurd conditions. The present seemed to be cast so precisely in the mould of previous ones that, not being given to syntheses of circumstances, he answered it with customary complacency.

‘If he were allied to us irretrievably, of course I, or any sensible man, should accept conditions that could not be altered; certainly not be hopelessly melancholy about it. I don’t believe anything in the world would make me hopelessly melancholy. And don’t let anything make you so, either.’

‘I won’t, papa,’ she cried, with a serene brightness that pleased him.

Certainly Mr. Swancourt must have been far from thinking that the brightness came from an exhilarating intention to hold back no longer from the mad action she had planned.

In the evening he drove away towards Stratleigh, quite alone. It was an unusual course for him. At the door Elfride had been again almost impelled by her feelings to pour out all.

‘Why are you going to Stratleigh, papa?’ she said, and looked at him longingly.

‘I will tell you to-morrow when I come back,’ he said cheerily; ‘not before then, Elfride. Thou wilt not utter what thou dost not know, and so far will I trust thee, gentle Elfride.’

She was repressed and hurt.

‘I will tell you my errand to Plymouth, too, when I come back,’ she murmured.

He went away. His jocularly made her intention seem the lighter, as his indifference made her more resolved to do as she liked.

It was a familiar September sunset, dark-blue fragments of cloud upon an orange-yellow sky. These sunsets used to tempt her to walk towards them, as any beautiful thing tempts a near approach. She went through the field to the privet hedge, clambered into the middle of it, and reclined upon the thick boughs. After looking westward for a considerable time, she blamed herself for not looking eastward to where Stephen was, and turned round. Ultimately her eyes fell upon the ground.

A peculiarity was observable beneath her. A green field spread itself on each side of the hedge, one belonging to the glebe, the other being a part of the land attached to the manor-house adjoining. On the vicarage side she saw a little footpath, the distinctive and altogether exceptional feature of which consisted in its being only about ten yards long; it terminated abruptly at each end.

A footpath, suddenly beginning and suddenly ending, coming from nowhere and leading nowhere, she had never seen before.

Yes, she had, on second thoughts. She had seen exactly such a path trodden in the front of barracks by the sentry.

And this recollection explained the origin of the path here. Her father had trodden it by pacing up and down, as she had once seen him doing.

Sitting on the hedge as she sat now, her eyes commanded a view of both sides of it. And a few minutes later, Elfride looked over to the manor side.

Here was another sentry path. It was like the first in length, and it began and ended exactly opposite the beginning and ending of its neighbour, but it was thinner, and less distinct.

Two reasons existed for the difference. This one might have been trodden by a similar weight of tread to the other, exercised a less number of times; or it might have been walked just as frequently, but by lighter feet.

Probably a gentleman from Scotland-yard, had he been passing at the time, might have considered the latter alternative as the more probable. Elfride thought otherwise, so far as she thought at all. But her own great To-Morrow was now imminent; all thoughts inspired by casual sights of the eye were only allowed to exercise themselves in inferior corners of her brain, previously to being banished altogether.

Elfride was at length compelled to reason practically upon her undertaking. All her definite perceptions thereon, when the emotion accompanying them was abstracted, amounted to no more than these:

‘Say an hour and three-quarters to ride to St. Launce’s.

‘Say half an hour at the Falcon to change my dress.

‘Say two hours waiting for some train and getting to Plymouth.

‘Say an hour to spare before twelve o’clock.

‘Total time from leaving Endelstow till twelve o’clock, five hours.

‘Therefore I shall have to start at seven.’

No surprise or sense of unwontedness entered the minds of the servants at her early ride. The monotony of life we associate with people of small incomes in districts out of the sound of the railway whistle, has one exception, which puts into shade the experience of dwellers about the great centres of population — that is, in travelling. Every journey there is more or less an adventure; adventurous hours are necessarily chosen for the most commonplace outing. Miss Elfride had to leave early — that was all.

Elfride never went out on horseback but she brought home something — something found, or something bought. If she trotted to town or village, her burden was books. If to hills, woods, or the seashore, it was wonderful mosses, abnormal twigs, a handkerchief of wet shells or seaweed.

Once, in muddy weather, when Pansy was walking with her down the street of Castle Boterel, on a fair-day, a packet in front of her and a packet under her arm, an accident befell the packets, and they slipped down. On one side of her, three volumes of fiction lay kissing the mud; on the other numerous skeins of polychromatic wools lay absorbing it. Unpleasant women smiled through windows at the mishap, the men all looked round, and a boy, who was minding a ginger-bread stall whilst the owner had gone to get drunk, laughed loudly. The blue eyes turned to sapphires, and the cheeks crimsoned with vexation.

After that misadventure she set her wits to work, and was ingenious enough to invent an arrangement of small straps about the saddle, by which a great deal could be safely carried thereon, in a small compass. Here she now spread out and fastened a plain dark walking-dress and a few other trifles of apparel. Worm opened the gate for her, and she vanished away.

One of the brightest mornings of late summer shone upon her. The heather was at its purplest, the furze at its yellowest, the grasshoppers chirped loud enough for birds, the snakes hissed like little engines, and Elfride at first felt lively. Sitting at ease upon Pansy, in her orthodox riding-habit and nondescript hat, she looked what she felt. But the mercury of those days had a trick of falling unexpectedly. First, only for one minute in ten had she a sense of depression. Then a large cloud, that had been hanging in the north like a black fleece, came and placed itself between her and the sun. It helped on what was already inevitable, and she sank into a uniformity of sadness.

She turned in the saddle and looked back. They were now on an open table-land, whose altitude still gave her a view of the sea by Endelstow. She looked longingly at that spot.

During this little revulsion of feeling Pansy had been still advancing, and Elfride felt it would be absurd to turn her little mare's head the other way. 'Still,' she thought, 'if I had a mamma at home I WOULD go back!'

And making one of those stealthy movements by which women let their hearts juggle with their brains, she did put the horse's head about, as if unconsciously, and went at a hand-gallop towards home for more than a mile. By this time, from the inveterate habit of valuing what we have renounced directly the alternative is chosen, the thought of her forsaken Stephen recalled her, and she turned about, and cantered on to St. Launce's again.

This miserable strife of thought now began to rage in all its wildness. Overwrought and trembling, she dropped the rein upon Pansy's shoulders, and vowed she would be led whither the horse would take her.

Pansy slackened her pace to a walk, and walked on with her agitated burden for three or four minutes. At the expiration of this time they had come to a little by-way on the right, leading down a slope to a pool of water. The pony stopped, looked towards the pool, and then advanced and stooped to drink.

Elfride looked at her watch and discovered that if she were going to reach St. Launce's early enough to change her dress at the Falcon, and get a chance of some early train to Plymouth — there were only two available — it was necessary to proceed at once.

She was impatient. It seemed as if Pansy would never stop drinking; and the repose of the pool, the idle motions of the insects and flies upon it, the placid waving of the flags, the leaf-skeletons, like Genoese filigree, placidly sleeping at the bottom, by their contrast with her own turmoil made her impatience greater.

Pansy did turn at last, and went up the slope again to the high-road. The pony came upon it, and stood cross-wise, looking up and down. Elfride's heart throbbed

erratically, and she thought, 'Horses, if left to themselves, make for where they are best fed. Pansy will go home.'

Pansy turned and walked on towards St. Launce's

Pansy at home, during summer, had little but grass to live on. After a run to St. Launce's she always had a feed of corn to support her on the return journey. Therefore, being now more than half way, she preferred St. Launce's.

But Elfride did not remember this now. All she cared to recognize was a dreamy fancy that to-day's rash action was not her own. She was disabled by her moods, and it seemed indispensable to adhere to the programme. So strangely involved are motives that, more than by her promise to Stephen, more even than by her love, she was forced on by a sense of the necessity of keeping faith with herself, as promised in the inane vow of ten minutes ago.

She hesitated no longer. Pansy went, like the steed of Adonis, as if she told the steps. Presently the quaint gables and jumbled roofs of St. Launce's were spread beneath her, and going down the hill she entered the courtyard of the Falcon. Mrs. Buckle, the landlady, came to the door to meet her.

The Swancourts were well known here. The transition from equestrian to the ordinary guise of railway travellers had been more than once performed by father and daughter in this establishment.

In less than a quarter of an hour Elfride emerged from the door in her walking dress, and went to the railway. She had not told Mrs. Buckle anything as to her intentions, and was supposed to have gone out shopping.

An hour and forty minutes later, and she was in Stephen's arms at the Plymouth station. Not upon the platform — in the secret retreat of a deserted waiting-room.

Stephen's face boded ill. He was pale and despondent.

'What is the matter?' she asked.

'We cannot be married here to-day, my Elfie! I ought to have known it and stayed here. In my ignorance I did not. I have the licence, but it can only be used in my parish in London. I only came down last night, as you know.'

'What shall we do?' she said blankly.

'There's only one thing we can do, darling.'

'What's that?'

'Go on to London by a train just starting, and be married there to-morrow.'

'Passengers for the 11.5 up-train take their seats!' said a guard's voice on the platform.

'Will you go, Elfride?'

'I will.'

In three minutes the train had moved off, bearing away with it Stephen and Elfride.

CHAPTER XII

‘Adieu! she cries, and waved her lily hand.’

The few tattered clouds of the morning enlarged and united, the sun withdrew behind them to emerge no more that day, and the evening drew to a close in drifts of rain. The water-drops beat like duck shot against the window of the railway-carriage containing Stephen and Elfride.

The journey from Plymouth to Paddington, by even the most headlong express, allows quite enough leisure for passion of any sort to cool. Elfride’s excitement had passed off, and she sat in a kind of stupor during the latter half of the journey. She was aroused by the clanging of the maze of rails over which they traced their way at the entrance to the station.

Is this London?’ she said.

‘Yes, darling,’ said Stephen in a tone of assurance he was far from feeling. To him, no less than to her, the reality so greatly differed from the prefiguring.

She peered out as well as the window, beaded with drops, would allow her, and saw only the lamps, which had just been lit, blinking in the wet atmosphere, and rows of hideous zinc chimney-pipes in dim relief against the sky. She writhed uneasily, as when a thought is swelling in the mind which must cause much pain at its deliverance in words. Elfride had known no more about the stings of evil report than the native wild-fowl knew of the effects of Crusoe’s first shot. Now she saw a little further, and a little further still.

The train stopped. Stephen relinquished the soft hand he had held all the day, and proceeded to assist her on to the platform.

This act of alighting upon strange ground seemed all that was wanted to complete a resolution within her.

She looked at her betrothed with despairing eyes.

‘O Stephen,’ she exclaimed, ‘I am so miserable! I must go home again — I must — I must! Forgive my wretched vacillation. I don’t like it here — nor myself — nor you!’

Stephen looked bewildered, and did not speak.

‘Will you allow me to go home?’ she implored. ‘I won’t trouble you to go with me. I will not be any weight upon you; only say you will agree to my returning; that you will not hate me for it, Stephen! It is better that I should return again; indeed it is, Stephen.’

‘But we can’t return now,’ he said in a deprecatory tone.

‘I must! I will!’

‘How? When do you want to go?’

‘Now. Can we go at once?’

The lad looked hopelessly along the platform.

‘If you must go, and think it wrong to remain, dearest,’ said he sadly, ‘you shall. You shall do whatever you like, my Elfride. But would you in reality rather go now than stay till to-morrow, and go as my wife?’

‘Yes, yes — much — anything to go now. I must; I must!’ she cried.

‘We ought to have done one of two things,’ he answered gloomily. ‘Never to have started, or not to have returned without being married. I don’t like to say it, Elfride — indeed I don’t; but you must be told this, that going back unmarried may compromise your good name in the eyes of people who may hear of it.’

‘They will not; and I must go.’

‘O Elfride! I am to blame for bringing you away.’

‘Not at all. I am the elder.’

‘By a month; and what’s that? But never mind that now.’ He looked around. ‘Is there a train for Plymouth to-night?’ he inquired of a guard. The guard passed on and did not speak.

‘Is there a train for Plymouth to-night?’ said Elfride to another.

‘Yes, miss; the 8.10 — leaves in ten minutes. You have come to the wrong platform; it is the other side. Change at Bristol into the night mail. Down that staircase, and under the line.’

They ran down the staircase — Elfride first — to the booking-office, and into a carriage with an official standing beside the door. ‘Show your tickets, please.’ They are locked in — men about the platform accelerate their velocities till they fly up and down like shuttles in a loom — a whistle — the waving of a flag — a human cry — a steam groan — and away they go to Plymouth again, just catching these words as they glide off:

‘Those two youngsters had a near run for it, and no mistake!’

Elfride found her breath.

‘And have you come too, Stephen? Why did you?’

‘I shall not leave you till I see you safe at St. Launce’s. Do not think worse of me than I am, Elfride.’

And then they rattled along through the night, back again by the way they had come. The weather cleared, and the stars shone in upon them. Their two or three fellow-passengers sat for most of the time with closed eyes. Stephen sometimes slept; Elfride alone was wakeful and palpitating hour after hour.

The day began to break, and revealed that they were by the sea. Red rocks overhung them, and, receding into distance, grew livid in the blue grey atmosphere. The sun rose, and sent penetrating shafts of light in upon their weary faces. Another hour, and the world began to be busy. They waited yet a little, and the train slackened its speed in view of the platform at St. Launce’s.

She shivered, and mused sadly.

‘I did not see all the consequences,’ she said. ‘Appearances are woefully against me. If anybody finds me out, I am, I suppose, disgraced.’

‘Then appearances will speak falsely; and how can that matter, even if they do? I shall be your husband sooner or later, for certain, and so prove your purity.’

‘Stephen, once in London I ought to have married you,’ she said firmly. ‘It was my only safe defence. I see more things now than I did yesterday. My only remaining chance is not to be discovered; and that we must fight for most desperately.’

They stepped out. Elfride pulled a thick veil over her face.

A woman with red and scaly eyelids and glistening eyes was sitting on a bench just inside the office-door. She fixed her eyes upon Elfride with an expression whose force it was impossible to doubt, but the meaning of which was not clear; then upon the carriage they had left. She seemed to read a sinister story in the scene.

Elfride shrank back, and turned the other way.

‘Who is that woman?’ said Stephen. ‘She looked hard at you.’

‘Mrs. Jethway — a widow, and mother of that young man whose tomb we sat on the other night. Stephen, she is my enemy. Would that God had had mercy enough upon me to have hidden this from HER!’

‘Do not talk so hopelessly,’ he remonstrated. ‘I don’t think she recognized us.’

‘I pray that she did not.’

He put on a more vigorous mood.

‘Now, we will go and get some breakfast.’

‘No, no!’ she begged. ‘I cannot eat. I MUST get back to Endelstow.’

Elfride was as if she had grown years older than Stephen now.

‘But you have had nothing since last night but that cup of tea at Bristol.’

‘I can’t eat, Stephen.’

‘Wine and biscuit?’

‘No.’

‘Nor tea, nor coffee?’

‘No.’

‘A glass of water?’

‘No. I want something that makes people strong and energetic for the present, that borrows the strength of to-morrow for use to-day — leaving to-morrow without any at all for that matter; or even that would take all life away to-morrow, so long as it enabled me to get home again now. Brandy, that’s what I want. That woman’s eyes have eaten my heart away!’

‘You are wild; and you grieve me, darling. Must it be brandy?’

‘Yes, if you please.’

‘How much?’

‘I don’t know. I have never drunk more than a teaspoonful at once. All I know is that I want it. Don’t get it at the Falcon.’

He left her in the fields, and went to the nearest inn in that direction. Presently he returned with a small flask nearly full, and some slices of bread-and-butter, thin as wafers, in a paper-bag. Elfride took a sip or two.

‘It goes into my eyes,’ she said wearily. ‘I can’t take any more. Yes, I will; I will close my eyes. Ah, it goes to them by an inside route. I don’t want it; throw it away.’

However, she could eat, and did eat. Her chief attention was concentrated upon how to get the horse from the Falcon stables without suspicion. Stephen was not allowed to accompany her into the town. She acted now upon conclusions reached without any aid from him: his power over her seemed to have departed.

‘You had better not be seen with me, even here where I am so little known. We have begun stealthily as thieves, and we must end stealthily as thieves, at all hazards. Until papa has been told by me myself, a discovery would be terrible.’

Walking and gloomily talking thus they waited till nearly nine o’clock, at which time Elfride thought she might call at the Falcon without creating much surprise. Behind the railway-station was the river, spanned by an old Tudor bridge, whence the road diverged in two directions, one skirting the suburbs of the town, and winding round again into the high-road to Endelstow. Beside this road Stephen sat, and awaited her return from the Falcon.

He sat as one sitting for a portrait, motionless, watching the chequered lights and shades on the tree-trunks, the children playing opposite the school previous to entering for the morning lesson, the reapers in a field afar off. The certainty of possession had not come, and there was nothing to mitigate the youth’s gloom, that increased with the thought of the parting now so near.

At length she came trotting round to him, in appearance much as on the romantic morning of their visit to the cliff, but shorn of the radiance which glistened about her then. However, her comparative immunity from further risk and trouble had considerably composed her. Elfride’s capacity for being wounded was only surpassed by her capacity for healing, which rightly or wrongly is by some considered an index of transientness of feeling in general.

‘Elfride, what did they say at the Falcon?’

‘Nothing. Nobody seemed curious about me. They knew I went to Plymouth, and I have stayed there a night now and then with Miss Bicknell. I rather calculated upon that.’

And now parting arose like a death to these children, for it was imperative that she should start at once. Stephen walked beside her for nearly a mile. During the walk he said sadly:

‘Elfride, four-and-twenty hours have passed, and the thing is not done.’

‘But you have insured that it shall be done.’

‘How have I?’

‘O Stephen, you ask how! Do you think I could marry another man on earth after having gone thus far with you? Have I not shown beyond possibility of doubt that I can be nobody else’s? Have I not irretrievably committed myself? — pride has stood for nothing in the face of my great love. You misunderstood my turning back, and I cannot explain it. It was wrong to go with you at all; and though it would have been worse to go further, it would have been better policy, perhaps. Be assured of this, that whenever you have a home for me — however poor and humble — and come and claim

me, I am ready.' She added bitterly, 'When my father knows of this day's work, he may be only too glad to let me go.'

'Perhaps he may, then, insist upon our marriage at once!' Stephen answered, seeing a ray of hope in the very focus of her remorse. 'I hope he may, even if we had still to part till I am ready for you, as we intended.'

Elfride did not reply.

'You don't seem the same woman, Elfie, that you were yesterday.'

'Nor am I. But good-bye. Go back now.' And she reined the horse for parting. 'O Stephen,' she cried, 'I feel so weak! I don't know how to meet him. Cannot you, after all, come back with me?'

'Shall I come?'

Elfride paused to think.

'No; it will not do. It is my utter foolishness that makes me say such words. But he will send for you.'

'Say to him,' continued Stephen, 'that we did this in the absolute despair of our minds. Tell him we don't wish him to favour us — only to deal justly with us. If he says, marry now, so much the better. If not, say that all may be put right by his promise to allow me to have you when I am good enough for you — which may be soon. Say I have nothing to offer him in exchange for his treasure — the more sorry I; but all the love, and all the life, and all the labour of an honest man shall be yours. As to when this had better be told, I leave you to judge.'

His words made her cheerful enough to toy with her position.

'And if ill report should come, Stephen,' she said smiling, 'why, the orange-tree must save me, as it saved virgins in St. George's time from the poisonous breath of the dragon. There, forgive me for forwardness: I am going.'

Then the boy and girl beguiled themselves with words of half-parting only.

'Own wifie, God bless you till we meet again!'

'Till we meet again, good-bye!'

And the pony went on, and she spoke to him no more. He saw her figure diminish and her blue veil grow gray — saw it with the agonizing sensations of a slow death.

After thus parting from a man than whom she had known none greater as yet, Elfride rode rapidly onwards, a tear being occasionally shaken from her eyes into the road. What yesterday had seemed so desirable, so promising, even trifling, had now acquired the complexion of a tragedy.

She saw the rocks and sea in the neighbourhood of Endelstow, and heaved a sigh of relief.

When she passed a field behind the vicarage she heard the voices of Unity and William Worm. They were hanging a carpet upon a line. Unity was uttering a sentence that concluded with 'when Miss Elfride comes.'

'When d'ye expect her?'

'Not till evening now. She's safe enough at Miss Bicknell's, bless ye.'

Elfride went round to the door. She did not knock or ring; and seeing nobody to take the horse, Elfride led her round to the yard, slipped off the bridle and saddle, drove her towards the paddock, and turned her in. Then Elfride crept indoors, and looked into all the ground-floor rooms. Her father was not there.

On the mantelpiece of the drawing-room stood a letter addressed to her in his handwriting. She took it and read it as she went upstairs to change her habit.

STRATLEIGH, Thursday.

‘DEAR ELFRIDE, — On second thoughts I will not return to-day, but only come as far as Wadcombe. I shall be at home by to-morrow afternoon, and bring a friend with me. — Yours, in haste,

C. S.’

After making a quick toilet she felt more revived, though still suffering from a headache. On going out of the door she met Unity at the top of the stair.

‘O Miss Elfride! I said to myself ‘tis her sperrit! We didn’t dream o’ you not coming home last night. You didn’t say anything about staying.’

‘I intended to come home the same evening, but altered my plan. I wished I hadn’t afterwards. Papa will be angry, I suppose?’

‘Better not tell him, miss,’ said Unity.

‘I do fear to,’ she murmured. ‘Unity, would you just begin telling him when he comes home?’

‘What! and get you into trouble?’

‘I deserve it.’

‘No, indeed, I won’t,’ said Unity. ‘It is not such a mighty matter, Miss Elfride. I says to myself, master’s taking a hollerday, and because he’s not been kind lately to Miss Elfride, she — — ’

‘Is imitating him. Well, do as you like. And will you now bring me some luncheon?’

After satisfying an appetite which the fresh marine air had given her in its victory over an agitated mind, she put on her hat and went to the garden and summer-house. She sat down, and leant with her head in a corner. Here she fell asleep.

Half-awake, she hurriedly looked at the time. She had been there three hours. At the same moment she heard the outer gate swing together, and wheels sweep round the entrance; some prior noise from the same source having probably been the cause of her awaking. Next her father’s voice was heard calling to Worm.

Elfride passed along a walk towards the house behind a belt of shrubs. She heard a tongue holding converse with her father, which was not that of either of the servants. Her father and the stranger were laughing together. Then there was a rustling of silk, and Mr. Swancourt and his companion, or companions, to all seeming entered the door of the house, for nothing more of them was audible. Elfride had turned back to meditate on what friends these could be, when she heard footsteps, and her father exclaiming behind her:

‘O Elfride, here you are! I hope you got on well?’

Elfride’s heart smote her, and she did not speak.

‘Come back to the summer-house a minute,’ continued Mr. Swancourt; ‘I have to tell you of that I promised to.’

They entered the summer-house, and stood leaning over the knotty woodwork of the balustrade.

‘Now,’ said her father radiantly, ‘guess what I have to say.’ He seemed to be regarding his own existence so intently, that he took no interest in nor even saw the complexion of hers.

‘I cannot, papa,’ she said sadly.

‘Try, dear.’

‘I would rather not, indeed.’

‘You are tired. You look worn. The ride was too much for you. Well, this is what I went away for. I went to be married!’

‘Married!’ she faltered, and could hardly check an involuntary ‘So did I.’ A moment after and her resolve to confess perished like a bubble.

‘Yes; to whom do you think? Mrs. Troyton, the new owner of the estate over the hedge, and of the old manor-house. It was only finally settled between us when I went to Stratleigh a few days ago.’ He lowered his voice to a sly tone of merriment. ‘Now, as to your stepmother, you’ll find she is not much to look at, though a good deal to listen to. She is twenty years older than myself, for one thing.’

‘You forget that I know her. She called here once, after we had been, and found her away from home.’

‘Of course, of course. Well, whatever her looks are, she’s as excellent a woman as ever breathed. She has had lately left her as absolute property three thousand five hundred a year, besides the devise of this estate — and, by the way, a large legacy came to her in satisfaction of dower, as it is called.’

‘Three thousand five hundred a year!’

‘And a large — well, a fair-sized — mansion in town, and a pedigree as long as my walking-stick; though that bears evidence of being rather a raked-up affair — done since the family got rich — people do those things now as they build ruins on maiden estates and cast antiques at Birmingham.’

Elfride merely listened and said nothing.

He continued more quietly and impressively. ‘Yes, Elfride, she is wealthy in comparison with us, though with few connections. However, she will introduce you to the world a little. We are going to exchange her house in Baker Street for one at Kensington, for your sake. Everybody is going there now, she says. At Easters we shall fly to town for the usual three months — I shall have a curate of course by that time. Elfride, I am past love, you know, and I honestly confess that I married her for your sake. Why a woman of her standing should have thrown herself away upon me, God knows. But I suppose her age and plainness were too pronounced for a town man. With your good looks, if you now play your cards well, you may marry anybody. Of course, a little contrivance will be necessary; but there’s nothing to stand between you and a husband with a title, that I can see. Lady Luxellian was only a squire’s daughter. Now, don’t

you see how foolish the old fancy was? But come, she is indoors waiting to see you. It is as good as a play, too,' continued the vicar, as they walked towards the house. 'I courted her through the privet hedge yonder: not entirely, you know, but we used to walk there of an evening — nearly every evening at last. But I needn't tell you details now; everything was terribly matter-of-fact, I assure you. At last, that day I saw her at Stratleigh, we determined to settle it off-hand.'

'And you never said a word to me,' replied Elfride, not reproachfully either in tone or thought. Indeed, her feeling was the very reverse of reproachful. She felt relieved and even thankful. Where confidence had not been given, how could confidence be expected?

Her father mistook her dispassionateness for a veil of politeness over a sense of ill-usage. 'I am not altogether to blame,' he said. 'There were two or three reasons for secrecy. One was the recent death of her relative the testator, though that did not apply to you. But remember, Elfride,' he continued in a stiffer tone, 'you had mixed yourself up so foolishly with those low people, the Smiths — and it was just, too, when Mrs. Troyton and myself were beginning to understand each other — that I resolved to say nothing even to you. How did I know how far you had gone with them and their son? You might have made a point of taking tea with them every day, for all that I knew.'

Elfride swallowed her feelings as she best could, and languidly though flatly asked a question.

'Did you kiss Mrs. Troyton on the lawn about three weeks ago? That evening I came into the study and found you had just had candles in?'

Mr. Swancourt looked rather red and abashed, as middle-aged lovers are apt to do when caught in the tricks of younger ones.

'Well, yes; I think I did,' he stammered; 'just to please her, you know.' And then recovering himself he laughed heartily.

'And was this what your Horatian quotation referred to?'

'It was, Elfride.'

They stepped into the drawing-room from the verandah. At that moment Mrs. Swancourt came downstairs, and entered the same room by the door.

'Here, Charlotte, is my little Elfride,' said Mr. Swancourt, with the increased affection of tone often adopted towards relations when newly produced.

Poor Elfride, not knowing what to do, did nothing at all; but stood receptive of all that came to her by sight, hearing, and touch.

Mrs. Swancourt moved forward, took her step-daughter's hand, then kissed her.

'Ah, darling!' she exclaimed good-humouredly, 'you didn't think when you showed a strange old woman over the conservatory a month or two ago, and explained the flowers to her so prettily, that she would so soon be here in new colours. Nor did she, I am sure.'

The new mother had been truthfully enough described by Mr. Swancourt. She was not physically attractive. She was dark — very dark — in complexion, portly in figure,

and with a plentiful residuum of hair in the proportion of half a dozen white ones to half a dozen black ones, though the latter were black indeed. No further observed, she was not a woman to like. But there was more to see. To the most superficial critic it was apparent that she made no attempt to disguise her age. She looked sixty at the first glance, and close acquaintanceship never proved her older.

Another and still more winning trait was one attaching to the corners of her mouth. Before she made a remark these often twitched gently: not backwards and forwards, the index of nervousness; not down upon the jaw, the sign of determination; but palpably upwards, in precisely the curve adopted to represent mirth in the broad caricatures of schoolboys. Only this element in her face was expressive of anything within the woman, but it was unmistakable. It expressed humour subjective as well as objective — which could survey the peculiarities of self in as whimsical a light as those of other people.

This is not all of Mrs. Swancourt. She had held out to Elfride hands whose fingers were literally stiff with rings, *signis auroque rigentes*, like Helen's robe. These rows of rings were not worn in vanity apparently. They were mostly antique and dull, though a few were the reverse.

RIGHT HAND.

1st. Plainly set oval onyx, representing a devil's head. 2nd. Green jasper intaglio, with red veins. 3rd. Entirely gold, bearing figure of a hideous griffin. 4th. A sea-green monster diamond, with small diamonds round it. 5th. Antique cornelian intaglio of dancing figure of a satyr. 6th. An angular band chased with dragons' heads. 7th. A faceted carbuncle accompanied by ten little twinkling emeralds; &c. &c.

LEFT HAND.

1st. A reddish-yellow toadstone. 2nd. A heavy ring enamelled in colours, and bearing a jacynth. 3rd. An amethystine sapphire. 4th. A polished ruby, surrounded by diamonds. 5th. The engraved ring of an abbess. 6th. A gloomy intaglio; &c. &c.

Beyond this rather quaint array of stone and metal Mrs. Swancourt wore no ornament whatever.

Elfride had been favourably impressed with Mrs. Troyton at their meeting about two months earlier; but to be pleased with a woman as a momentary acquaintance was different from being taken with her as a stepmother. However, the suspension of feeling was but for a moment. Elfride decided to like her still.

Mrs. Swancourt was a woman of the world as to knowledge, the reverse as to action, as her marriage suggested. Elfride and the lady were soon inextricably involved in conversation, and Mr. Swancourt left them to themselves.

'And what do you find to do with yourself here?' Mrs. Swancourt said, after a few remarks about the wedding. 'You ride, I know.'

'Yes, I ride. But not much, because papa doesn't like my going alone.'

'You must have somebody to look after you.'

'And I read, and write a little.'

'You should write a novel. The regular resource of people who don't go enough into the world to live a novel is to write one.'

‘I have done it,’ said Elfride, looking dubiously at Mrs. Swancourt, as if in doubt whether she would meet with ridicule there.

‘That’s right. Now, then, what is it about, dear?’

‘About — well, it is a romance of the Middle Ages.’

‘Knowing nothing of the present age, which everybody knows about, for safety you chose an age known neither to you nor other people. That’s it, eh? No, no; I don’t mean it, dear.’

‘Well, I have had some opportunities of studying mediaeval art and manners in the library and private museum at Endelstow House, and I thought I should like to try my hand upon a fiction. I know the time for these tales is past; but I was interested in it, very much interested.’

‘When is it to appear?’

‘Oh, never, I suppose.’

‘Nonsense, my dear girl. Publish it, by all means. All ladies do that sort of thing now; not for profit, you know, but as a guarantee of mental respectability to their future husbands.’

‘An excellent idea of us ladies.’

‘Though I am afraid it rather resembles the melancholy ruse of throwing loaves over castle-walls at besiegers, and suggests desperation rather than plenty inside.’

‘Did you ever try it?’

‘No; I was too far gone even for that.’

‘Papa says no publisher will take my book.’

‘That remains to be proved. I’ll give my word, my dear, that by this time next year it shall be printed.’

‘Will you, indeed?’ said Elfride, partially brightening with pleasure, though she was sad enough in her depths. ‘I thought brains were the indispensable, even if the only, qualification for admission to the republic of letters. A mere commonplace creature like me will soon be turned out again.’

‘Oh no; once you are there you’ll be like a drop of water in a piece of rock-crystal — your medium will dignify your commonness.’

‘It will be a great satisfaction,’ Elfride murmured, and thought of Stephen, and wished she could make a great fortune by writing romances, and marry him and live happily.

‘And then we’ll go to London, and then to Paris,’ said Mrs. Swancourt. ‘I have been talking to your father about it. But we have first to move into the manor-house, and we think of staying at Torquay whilst that is going on. Meanwhile, instead of going on a honeymoon scamper by ourselves, we have come home to fetch you, and go all together to Bath for two or three weeks.’

Elfride assented pleasantly, even gladly; but she saw that, by this marriage, her father and herself had ceased for ever to be the close relations they had been up to a few weeks ago. It was impossible now to tell him the tale of her wild elopement with Stephen Smith.

He was still snugly housed in her heart. His absence had regained for him much of that aureola of saintship which had been nearly abstracted during her reproachful mood on that miserable journey from London. Rapture is often cooled by contact with its cause, especially if under awkward conditions. And that last experience with Stephen had done anything but make him shine in her eyes. His very kindness in letting her return was his offence. Elfride had her sex's love of sheer force in a man, however ill-directed; and at that critical juncture in London Stephen's only chance of retaining the ascendancy over her that his face and not his parts had acquired for him, would have been by doing what, for one thing, he was too youthful to undertake — that was, dragging her by the wrist to the rails of some altar, and peremptorily marrying her. Decisive action is seen by appreciative minds to be frequently objectless, and sometimes fatal; but decision, however suicidal, has more charm for a woman than the most unequivocal Fabian success.

However, some of the unpleasant accessories of that occasion were now out of sight again, and Stephen had resumed not a few of his fancy colours.

CHAPTER XIII

‘He set in order many proverbs.’

It is London in October — two months further on in the story.

Bede's Inn has this peculiarity, that it faces, receives from, and discharges into a bustling thoroughfare speaking only of wealth and respectability, whilst its postern abuts on as crowded and poverty-stricken a network of alleys as are to be found anywhere in the metropolis. The moral consequences are, first, that those who occupy chambers in the Inn may see a great deal of shirtless humanity's habits and enjoyments without doing more than look down from a back window; and second they may hear wholesome though unpleasant social reminders through the medium of a harsh voice, an unequal footstep, the echo of a blow or a fall, which originates in the person of some drunkard or wife-beater, as he crosses and interferes with the quiet of the square. Characters of this kind frequently pass through the Inn from a little foxhole of an alley at the back, but they never loiter there.

It is hardly necessary to state that all the sights and movements proper to the Inn are most orderly. On the fine October evening on which we follow Stephen Smith to this place, a placid porter is sitting on a stool under a sycamore-tree in the midst, with a little cane in his hand. We notice the thick coat of soot upon the branches, hanging underneath them in flakes, as in a chimney. The blackness of these boughs does not at present improve the tree — nearly forsaken by its leaves as it is — but in the spring their green fresh beauty is made doubly beautiful by the contrast. Within the railings is a flower-garden of respectable dahlias and chrysanthemums, where a man is sweeping the leaves from the grass.

Stephen selects a doorway, and ascends an old though wide wooden staircase, with moulded balusters and handrail, which in a country manor-house would be considered a noteworthy specimen of Renaissance workmanship. He reaches a door on the first floor, over which is painted, in black letters, 'Mr. Henry Knight' — 'Barrister-at-law' being understood but not expressed. The wall is thick, and there is a door at its outer and inner face. The outer one happens to be ajar: Stephen goes to the other, and taps.

'Come in!' from distant penetralia.

First was a small anteroom, divided from the inner apartment by a wainscoted archway two or three yards wide. Across this archway hung a pair of dark-green curtains, making a mystery of all within the arch except the spasmodic scratching of a quill pen. Here was grouped a chaotic assemblage of articles — mainly old framed prints and paintings — leaning edgewise against the wall, like roofing slates in a builder's yard. All the books visible here were folios too big to be stolen — some lying on a heavy oak table in one corner, some on the floor among the pictures, the whole intermingled with old coats, hats, umbrellas, and walking-sticks.

Stephen pushed aside the curtain, and before him sat a man writing away as if his life depended upon it — which it did.

A man of thirty in a speckled coat, with dark brown hair, curly beard, and crisp moustache: the latter running into the beard on each side of the mouth, and, as usual, hiding the real expression of that organ under a chronic aspect of impassivity.

'Ah, my dear fellow, I knew 'twas you,' said Knight, looking up with a smile, and holding out his hand.

Knight's mouth and eyes came to view now. Both features were good, and had the peculiarity of appearing younger and fresher than the brow and face they belonged to, which were getting sicklied o'er by the unmistakable pale cast. The mouth had not quite relinquished rotundity of curve for the firm angularities of middle life; and the eyes, though keen, permeated rather than penetrated: what they had lost of their boy-time brightness by a dozen years of hard reading lending a quietness to their gaze which suited them well.

A lady would have said there was a smell of tobacco in the room: a man that there was not.

Knight did not rise. He looked at a timepiece on the mantelshelf, then turned again to his letters, pointing to a chair.

'Well, I am glad you have come. I only returned to town yesterday; now, don't speak, Stephen, for ten minutes; I have just that time to the late post. At the eleventh minute, I'm your man.'

Stephen sat down as if this kind of reception was by no means new, and away went Knight's pen, beating up and down like a ship in a storm.

Cicero called the library the soul of the house; here the house was all soul. Portions of the floor, and half the wall-space, were taken up by book-shelves ordinary and extraordinary; the remaining parts, together with brackets, side-tables, &c., being

occupied by casts, statuettes, medallions, and plaques of various descriptions, picked up by the owner in his wanderings through France and Italy.

One stream only of evening sunlight came into the room from a window quite in the corner, overlooking a court. An aquarium stood in the window. It was a dull parallelopipedon enough for living creatures at most hours of the day; but for a few minutes in the evening, as now, an errant, kindly ray lighted up and warmed the little world therein, when the many-coloured zoophytes opened and put forth their arms, the weeds acquired a rich transparency, the shells gleamed of a more golden yellow, and the timid community expressed gladness more plainly than in words.

Within the prescribed ten minutes Knight flung down his pen, rang for the boy to take the letters to the post, and at the closing of the door exclaimed, 'There; thank God, that's done. Now, Stephen, pull your chair round, and tell me what you have been doing all this time. Have you kept up your Greek?'

'No.'

'How's that?'

'I haven't enough spare time.'

'That's nonsense.'

'Well, I have done a great many things, if not that. And I have done one extraordinary thing.'

Knight turned full upon Stephen. 'Ah-ha! Now, then, let me look into your face, put two and two together, and make a shrewd guess.'

Stephen changed to a redder colour.

'Why, Smith,' said Knight, after holding him rigidly by the shoulders, and keenly scrutinising his countenance for a minute in silence, 'you have fallen in love.'

'Well — the fact is — — '

'Now, out with it.' But seeing that Stephen looked rather distressed, he changed to a kindly tone. 'Now Smith, my lad, you know me well enough by this time, or you ought to; and you know very well that if you choose to give me a detailed account of the phenomenon within you, I shall listen; if you don't, I am the last man in the world to care to hear it.'

'I'll tell this much: I HAVE fallen in love, and I want to be MARRIED.'

Knight looked ominous as this passed Stephen's lips.

'Don't judge me before you have heard more,' cried Stephen anxiously, seeing the change in his friend's countenance.

'I don't judge. Does your mother know about it?'

'Nothing definite.'

'Father?'

'No. But I'll tell you. The young person — — '

'Come, that's dreadfully ungallant. But perhaps I understand the frame of mind a little, so go on. Your sweetheart — — '

'She is rather higher in the world than I am.'

'As it should be.'

‘And her father won’t hear of it, as I now stand.’

‘Not an uncommon case.’

‘And now comes what I want your advice upon. Something has happened at her house which makes it out of the question for us to ask her father again now. So we are keeping silent. In the meantime an architect in India has just written to Mr. Hewby to ask whether he can find for him a young assistant willing to go over to Bombay to prepare drawings for work formerly done by the engineers. The salary he offers is 350 rupees a month, or about 35 Pounds. Hewby has mentioned it to me, and I have been to Dr. Wray, who says I shall acclimatise without much illness. Now, would you go?’

‘You mean to say, because it is a possible road to the young lady.’

‘Yes; I was thinking I could go over and make a little money, and then come back and ask for her. I have the option of practising for myself after a year.’

‘Would she be staunch?’

‘Oh yes! For ever — to the end of her life!’

‘How do you know?’

‘Why, how do people know? Of course, she will.’

Knight leant back in his chair. ‘Now, though I know her thoroughly as she exists in your heart, Stephen, I don’t know her in the flesh. All I want to ask is, is this idea of going to India based entirely upon a belief in her fidelity?’

‘Yes; I should not go if it were not for her.’

‘Well, Stephen, you have put me in rather an awkward position. If I give my true sentiments, I shall hurt your feelings; if I don’t, I shall hurt my own judgment. And remember, I don’t know much about women.’

‘But you have had attachments, although you tell me very little about them.’

‘And I only hope you’ll continue to prosper till I tell you more.’

Stephen winced at this rap. ‘I have never formed a deep attachment,’ continued Knight. ‘I never have found a woman worth it. Nor have I been once engaged to be married.’

‘You write as if you had been engaged a hundred times, if I may be allowed to say so,’ said Stephen in an injured tone.

‘Yes, that may be. But, my dear Stephen, it is only those who half know a thing that write about it. Those who know it thoroughly don’t take the trouble. All I know about women, or men either, is a mass of generalities. I plod along, and occasionally lift my eyes and skim the weltering surface of mankind lying between me and the horizon, as a crow might; no more.’

Knight stopped as if he had fallen into a train of thought, and Stephen looked with affectionate awe at a master whose mind, he believed, could swallow up at one meal all that his own head contained.

There was affective sympathy, but no great intellectual fellowship, between Knight and Stephen Smith. Knight had seen his young friend when the latter was a cherry-cheeked happy boy, had been interested in him, had kept his eye upon him, and

generously helped the lad to books, till the mere connection of patronage grew to acquaintance, and that ripened to friendship. And so, though Smith was not at all the man Knight would have deliberately chosen as a friend — or even for one of a group of a dozen friends — he somehow was his friend. Circumstance, as usual, did it all. How many of us can say of our most intimate alter ego, leaving alone friends of the outer circle, that he is the man we should have chosen, as embodying the net result after adding up all the points in human nature that we love, and principles we hold, and subtracting all that we hate? The man is really somebody we got to know by mere physical juxtaposition long maintained, and was taken into our confidence, and even heart, as a makeshift.

‘And what do you think of her?’ Stephen ventured to say, after a silence.

‘Taking her merits on trust from you,’ said Knight, ‘as we do those of the Roman poets of whom we know nothing but that they lived, I still think she will not stick to you through, say, three years of absence in India.’

‘But she will!’ cried Stephen desperately. ‘She is a girl all delicacy and honour. And no woman of that kind, who has committed herself so into a man’s hands as she has into mine, could possibly marry another.’

‘How has she committed herself?’ asked Knight curiously.

Stephen did not answer. Knight had looked on his love so sceptically that it would not do to say all that he had intended to say by any means.

‘Well, don’t tell,’ said Knight. ‘But you are begging the question, which is, I suppose, inevitable in love.’

‘And I’ll tell you another thing,’ the younger man pleaded. ‘You remember what you said to me once about women receiving a kiss. Don’t you? Why, that instead of our being charmed by the fascination of their bearing at such a time, we should immediately doubt them if their confusion has any GRACE in it — that awkward bungling was the true charm of the occasion, implying that we are the first who has played such a part with them.’

‘It is true, quite,’ said Knight musingly.

It often happened that the disciple thus remembered the lessons of the master long after the master himself had forgotten them.

‘Well, that was like her!’ cried Stephen triumphantly. ‘She was in such a flurry that she didn’t know what she was doing.’

‘Splendid, splendid!’ said Knight soothingly. ‘So that all I have to say is, that if you see a good opening in Bombay there’s no reason why you should not go without troubling to draw fine distinctions as to reasons. No man fully realises what opinions he acts upon, or what his actions mean.’

‘Yes; I go to Bombay. I’ll write a note here, if you don’t mind.’

‘Sleep over it — it is the best plan — and write to-morrow. Meantime, go there to that window and sit down, and look at my Humanity Show. I am going to dine out this evening, and have to dress here out of my portmanteau. I bring up my things like this to save the trouble of going down to my place at Richmond and back again.’

Knight then went to the middle of the room and flung open his portmanteau, and Stephen drew near the window. The streak of sunlight had crept upward, edged away, and vanished; the zoophytes slept: a dusky gloom pervaded the room. And now another volume of light shone over the window.

‘There!’ said Knight, ‘where is there in England a spectacle to equal that? I sit there and watch them every night before I go home. Softly open the sash.’

Beneath them was an alley running up to the wall, and thence turning sideways and passing under an arch, so that Knight’s back window was immediately over the angle, and commanded a view of the alley lengthwise. Crowds — mostly of women — were surging, bustling, and pacing up and down. Gaslights glared from butchers’ stalls, illuminating the lumps of flesh to splotches of orange and vermilion, like the wild colouring of Turner’s later pictures, whilst the purl and babble of tongues of every pitch and mood was to this human wild-wood what the ripple of a brook is to the natural forest.

Nearly ten minutes passed. Then Knight also came to the window.

‘Well, now, I call a cab and vanish down the street in the direction of Berkeley Square,’ he said, buttoning his waistcoat and kicking his morning suit into a corner. Stephen rose to leave.

‘What a heap of literature!’ remarked the young man, taking a final longing survey round the room, as if to abide there for ever would be the great pleasure of his life, yet feeling that he had almost outstayed his welcome-while. His eyes rested upon an arm-chair piled full of newspapers, magazines, and bright new volumes in green and red.

‘Yes,’ said Knight, also looking at them and breathing a sigh of weariness; ‘something must be done with several of them soon, I suppose. Stephen, you needn’t hurry away for a few minutes, you know, if you want to stay; I am not quite ready. Overhaul those volumes whilst I put on my coat, and I’ll walk a little way with you.’

Stephen sat down beside the arm-chair and began to tumble the books about. Among the rest he found a novelette in one volume, *THE COURT OF KELLYON CASTLE*. By Ernest Field.

‘Are you going to review this?’ inquired Stephen with apparent unconcern, and holding up Elfride’s effusion.

‘Which? Oh, that! I may — though I don’t do much light reviewing now. But it is reviewable.’

‘How do you mean?’

Knight never liked to be asked what he meant. ‘Mean! I mean that the majority of books published are neither good enough nor bad enough to provoke criticism, and that that book does provoke it.’

‘By its goodness or its badness?’ Stephen said with some anxiety on poor little Elfride’s score.

‘Its badness. It seems to be written by some girl in her teens.’

Stephen said not another word. He did not care to speak plainly of Elfride after that unfortunate slip his tongue had made in respect of her having committed herself; and, apart from that, Knight's severe — almost dogged and self-willed — honesty in criticizing was unassailable by the humble wish of a youthful friend like Stephen.

Knight was now ready. Turning off the gas, and slamming together the door, they went downstairs and into the street.

CHAPTER XIV

'We frolic while 'tis May.'

It has now to be realised that nearly three-quarters of a year have passed away. In place of the autumnal scenery which formed a setting to the previous enactments, we have the culminating blooms of summer in the year following.

Stephen is in India, slaving away at an office in Bombay; occasionally going up the country on professional errands, and wondering why people who had been there longer than he complained so much of the effect of the climate upon their constitutions. Never had a young man a finer start than seemed now to present itself to Stephen. It was just in that exceptional heyday of prosperity which shone over Bombay some few years ago, that he arrived on the scene. Building and engineering partook of the general impetus. Speculation moved with an accelerated velocity every successive day, the only disagreeable contingency connected with it being the possibility of a collapse.

Elfride had never told her father of the four-and-twenty-hours' escapade with Stephen, nor had it, to her knowledge, come to his ears by any other route. It was a secret trouble and grief to the girl for a short time, and Stephen's departure was another ingredient in her sorrow. But Elfride possessed special facilities for getting rid of trouble after a decent interval. Whilst a slow nature was imbibing a misfortune little by little, she had swallowed the whole agony of it at a draught and was brightening again. She could slough off a sadness and replace it by a hope as easily as a lizard renews a diseased limb.

And two such excellent distractions had presented themselves. One was bringing out the romance and looking for notices in the papers, which, though they had been significantly short so far, had served to divert her thoughts. The other was migrating from the vicarage to the more commodious old house of Mrs. Swancourt's, overlooking the same valley. Mr. Swancourt at first disliked the idea of being transplanted to feminine soil, but the obvious advantages of such an accession of dignity reconciled him to the change. So there was a radical 'move;' the two ladies staying at Torquay as had been arranged, the vicar going to and fro.

Mrs. Swancourt considerably enlarged Elfride's ideas in an aristocratic direction, and she began to forgive her father for his politic marriage. Certainly, in a worldly sense, a handsome face at three-and-forty had never served a man in better stead.

The new house at Kensington was ready, and they were all in town.

The Hyde Park shrubs had been transplanted as usual, the chairs ranked in line, the grass edgings trimmed, the roads made to look as if they were suffering from a heavy thunderstorm; carriages had been called for by the easeful, horses by the brisk, and the Drive and Row were again the groove of gaiety for an hour. We gaze upon the spectacle, at six o'clock on this midsummer afternoon, in a melon-frame atmosphere and beneath a violet sky. The Swancourt equipage formed one in the stream.

Mrs. Swancourt was a talker of talk of the incisive kind, which her low musical voice — the only beautiful point in the old woman — prevented from being wearisome.

'Now,' she said to Elfride, who, like AENEAS at Carthage, was full of admiration for the brilliant scene, 'you will find that our companionless state will give us, as it does everybody, an extraordinary power in reading the features of our fellow-creatures here. I always am a listener in such places as these — not to the narratives told by my neighbours' tongues, but by their faces — the advantage of which is, that whether I am in Row, Boulevard, Rialto, or Prado, they all speak the same language. I may have acquired some skill in this practice through having been an ugly lonely woman for so many years, with nobody to give me information; a thing you will not consider strange when the parallel case is borne in mind, — how truly people who have no clocks will tell the time of day.'

'Ay, that they will,' said Mr. Swancourt corroboratively. 'I have known labouring men at Endelstow and other farms who had framed complete systems of observation for that purpose. By means of shadows, winds, clouds, the movements of sheep and oxen, the singing of birds, the crowing of cocks, and a hundred other sights and sounds which people with watches in their pockets never know the existence of, they are able to pronounce within ten minutes of the hour almost at any required instant. That reminds me of an old story which I'm afraid is too bad — too bad to repeat.' Here the vicar shook his head and laughed inwardly.

'Tell it — do!' said the ladies.

'I mustn't quite tell it.'

'That's absurd,' said Mrs. Swancourt.

'It was only about a man who, by the same careful system of observation, was known to deceive persons for more than two years into the belief that he kept a barometer by stealth, so exactly did he foretell all changes in the weather by the braying of his ass and the temper of his wife.'

Elfride laughed.

'Exactly,' said Mrs. Swancourt. 'And in just the way that those learnt the signs of nature, I have learnt the language of her illegitimate sister — artificiality; and the fibbing of eyes, the contempt of nose-tips, the indignation of back hair, the laughter of clothes, the cynicism of footsteps, and the various emotions lying in walking-stick twirls, hat-liftings, the elevation of parasols, the carriage of umbrellas, become as A B C to me.'

‘Just look at that daughter’s sister class of mamma in the carriage across there,’ she continued to Elfride, pointing with merely a turn of her eye. ‘The absorbing self-consciousness of her position that is shown by her countenance is most humiliating to a lover of one’s country. You would hardly believe, would you, that members of a Fashionable World, whose professed zero is far above the highest degree of the humble, could be so ignorant of the elementary instincts of reticence.’

‘How?’

‘Why, to bear on their faces, as plainly as on a phylactery, the inscription, “Do, pray, look at the coronet on my panels.”’

‘Really, Charlotte,’ said the vicar, ‘you see as much in faces as Mr. Puff saw in Lord Burleigh’s nod.’

Elfride could not but admire the beauty of her fellow countrywomen, especially since herself and her own few acquaintances had always been slightly sunburnt or marked on the back of the hands by a bramble-scratch at this time of the year.

‘And what lovely flowers and leaves they wear in their bonnets!’ she exclaimed.

‘Oh yes,’ returned Mrs. Swancourt. ‘Some of them are even more striking in colour than any real ones. Look at that beautiful rose worn by the lady inside the rails. Elegant vine-tendrils introduced upon the stem as an improvement upon prickles, and all growing so naturally just over her ear — I say growing advisedly, for the pink of the petals and the pink of her handsome cheeks are equally from Nature’s hand to the eyes of the most casual observer.’

‘But praise them a little, they do deserve it!’ said generous Elfride.

‘Well, I do. See how the Duchess of — — waves to and fro in her seat, utilizing the sway of her landau by looking around only when her head is swung forward, with a passive pride which forbids a resistance to the force of circumstance. Look at the pretty pout on the mouths of that family there, retaining no traces of being arranged beforehand, so well is it done. Look at the demure close of the little fists holding the parasols; the tiny alert thumb, sticking up erect against the ivory stem as knowing as can be, the satin of the parasol invariably matching the complexion of the face beneath it, yet seemingly by an accident, which makes the thing so attractive. There’s the red book lying on the opposite seat, bespeaking the vast numbers of their acquaintance. And I particularly admire the aspect of that abundantly daughtered woman on the other side — I mean her look of unconsciousness that the girls are stared at by the walkers, and above all the look of the girls themselves — losing their gaze in the depths of handsome men’s eyes without appearing to notice whether they are observing masculine eyes or the leaves of the trees. There’s praise for you. But I am only jesting, child — you know that.’

‘Piph-ph-ph — how warm it is, to be sure!’ said Mr. Swancourt, as if his mind were a long distance from all he saw. ‘I declare that my watch is so hot that I can scarcely bear to touch it to see what the time is, and all the world smells like the inside of a hat.’

‘How the men stare at you, Elfride!’ said the elder lady. ‘You will kill me quite, I am afraid.’

‘Kill you?’

‘As a diamond kills an opal in the same setting.’

‘I have noticed several ladies and gentlemen looking at me,’ said Elfride artlessly, showing her pleasure at being observed.

‘My dear, you mustn’t say “gentlemen” nowadays,’ her stepmother answered in the tones of arch concern that so well became her ugliness. ‘We have handed over “gentlemen” to the lower middle class, where the word is still to be heard at tradesmen’s balls and provincial tea-parties, I believe. It is done with here.’

‘What must I say, then?’

‘“Ladies and MEN” always.’

At this moment appeared in the stream of vehicles moving in the contrary direction a chariot presenting in its general surface the rich indigo hue of a midnight sky, the wheels and margins being picked out in delicate lines of ultramarine; the servants’ liveries were dark-blue coats and silver lace, and breeches of neutral Indian red. The whole concern formed an organic whole, and moved along behind a pair of dark chestnut geldings, who advanced in an indifferently zealous trot, very daintily performed, and occasionally shrugged divers points of their veiny surface as if they were rather above the business.

In this sat a gentleman with no decided characteristics more than that he somewhat resembled a good-natured commercial traveller of the superior class. Beside him was a lady with skim-milky eyes and complexion, belonging to the “interesting” class of women, where that class merges in the sickly, her greatest pleasure being apparently to enjoy nothing. Opposite this pair sat two little girls in white hats and blue feathers.

The lady saw Elfride, smiled and bowed, and touched her husband’s elbow, who turned and received Elfride’s movement of recognition with a gallant elevation of his hat. Then the two children held up their arms to Elfride, and laughed gleefully.

‘Who is that?’

‘Why, Lord Luxellian, isn’t it?’ said Mrs. Swancourt, who with the vicar had been seated with her back towards them.

‘Yes,’ replied Elfride. ‘He is the one man of those I have seen here whom I consider handsomer than papa.’

‘Thank you, dear,’ said Mr. Swancourt.

‘Yes; but your father is so much older. When Lord Luxellian gets a little further on in life, he won’t be half so good-looking as our man.’

‘Thank you, dear, likewise,’ said Mr. Swancourt.

‘See,’ exclaimed Elfride, still looking towards them, ‘how those little dears want me! Actually one of them is crying for me to come.’

‘We were talking of bracelets just now. Look at Lady Luxellian’s,’ said Mrs. Swancourt, as that baroness lifted up her arm to support one of the children. ‘It is slipping

up her arm — too large by half. I hate to see daylight between a bracelet and a wrist; I wonder women haven't better taste.'

'It is not on that account, indeed,' Elfride expostulated. 'It is that her arm has got thin, poor thing. You cannot think how much she has altered in this last twelvemonth.'

The carriages were now nearer together, and there was an exchange of more familiar greetings between the two families. Then the Luxellians crossed over and drew up under the plane-trees, just in the rear of the Swancourts. Lord Luxellian alighted, and came forward with a musical laugh.

It was his attraction as a man. People liked him for those tones, and forgot that he had no talents. Acquaintances remembered Mr. Swancourt by his manner; they remembered Stephen Smith by his face, Lord Luxellian by his laugh.

Mr. Swancourt made some friendly remarks — among others things upon the heat.

'Yes,' said Lord Luxellian, 'we were driving by a furrier's window this afternoon, and the sight filled us all with such a sense of suffocation that we were glad to get away. Ha-ha!' He turned to Elfride. 'Miss Swancourt, I have hardly seen or spoken to you since your literary feat was made public. I had no idea a chiel was taking notes down at quiet Endelstow, or I should certainly have put myself and friends upon our best behaviour. Swancourt, why didn't you give me a hint!'

Elfride fluttered, blushed, laughed, said it was nothing to speak of, &c. &c.

'Well, I think you were rather unfairly treated by the PRESENT, I certainly do. Writing a heavy review like that upon an elegant trifle like the COURT OF KELLYON CASTLE was absurd.'

'What?' said Elfride, opening her eyes. 'Was I reviewed in the PRESENT?'

'Oh yes; didn't you see it? Why, it was four or five months ago!'

'No, I never saw it. How sorry I am! What a shame of my publishers! They promised to send me every notice that appeared.'

'Ah, then, I am almost afraid I have been giving you disagreeable information, intentionally withheld out of courtesy. Depend upon it they thought no good would come of sending it, and so would not pain you unnecessarily.'

'Oh no; I am indeed glad you have told me, Lord Luxellian. It is quite a mistaken kindness on their part. Is the review so much against me?' she inquired tremulously.

'No, no; not that exactly — though I almost forget its exact purport now. It was merely — merely sharp, you know — ungenerous, I might say. But really my memory does not enable me to speak decidedly.'

'We'll drive to the PRESENT office, and get one directly; shall we, papa?'

'If you are so anxious, dear, we will, or send. But to-morrow will do.'

'And do oblige me in a little matter now, Elfride,' said Lord Luxellian warmly, and looking as if he were sorry he had brought news that disturbed her. 'I am in reality sent here as a special messenger by my little Polly and Katie to ask you to come into our carriage with them for a short time. I am just going to walk across into Piccadilly, and my wife is left alone with them. I am afraid they are rather spoiled children; but I have half promised them you shall come.'

The steps were let down, and Elfride was transferred — to the intense delight of the little girls, and to the mild interest of loungers with red skins and long necks, who cursorily eyed the performance with their walking-sticks to their lips, occasionally laughing from far down their throats and with their eyes, their mouths not being concerned in the operation at all. Lord Luxellian then told the coachman to drive on, lifted his hat, smiled a smile that missed its mark and alighted on a total stranger, who bowed in bewilderment. Lord Luxellian looked long at Elfride.

The look was a manly, open, and genuine look of admiration; a momentary tribute of a kind which any honest Englishman might have paid to fairness without being ashamed of the feeling, or permitting it to encroach in the slightest degree upon his emotional obligations as a husband and head of a family. Then Lord Luxellian turned away, and walked musingly to the upper end of the promenade.

Mr. Swancourt had alighted at the same time with Elfride, crossing over to the Row for a few minutes to speak to a friend he recognized there; and his wife was thus left sole tenant of the carriage.

Now, whilst this little act had been in course of performance, there stood among the promenading spectators a man of somewhat different description from the rest. Behind the general throng, in the rear of the chairs, and leaning against the trunk of a tree, he looked at Elfride with quiet and critical interest.

Three points about this unobtrusive person showed promptly to the exercised eye that he was not a Row man *pur sang*. First, an irrepressible wrinkle or two in the waist of his frock-coat — denoting that he had not damned his tailor sufficiently to drive that tradesman up to the orthodox high pressure of cunning workmanship. Second, a slight slovenliness of umbrella, occasioned by its owner's habit of resting heavily upon it, and using it as a veritable walking-stick, instead of letting its point touch the ground in the most coquettish of kisses, as is the proper Row manner to do. Third, and chief reason, that try how you might, you could scarcely help supposing, on looking at his face, that your eyes were not far from a well-finished mind, instead of the well-finished skin *et praeterea nihil*, which is by rights the Mark of the Row.

The probability is that, had not Mrs. Swancourt been left alone in her carriage under the tree, this man would have remained in his unobserved seclusion. But seeing her thus, he came round to the front, stooped under the rail, and stood beside the carriage-door.

Mrs. Swancourt looked reflectively at him for a quarter of a minute, then held out her hand laughingly:

‘Why, Henry Knight — of course it is! My — second — third — fourth cousin — what shall I say? At any rate, my kinsman.’

‘Yes, one of a remnant not yet cut off. I scarcely was certain of you, either, from where I was standing.’

‘I have not seen you since you first went to Oxford; consider the number of years! You know, I suppose, of my marriage?’

And there sprang up a dialogue concerning family matters of birth, death, and marriage, which it is not necessary to detail. Knight presently inquired:

‘The young lady who changed into the other carriage is, then, your stepdaughter?’

‘Yes, Elfride. You must know her.’

‘And who was the lady in the carriage Elfride entered; who had an ill-defined and watery look, as if she were only the reflection of herself in a pool?’

‘Lady Luxellian; very weakly, Elfride says. My husband is remotely connected with them; but there is not much intimacy on account of — — . However, Henry, you’ll come and see us, of course. 24 Chevron Square. Come this week. We shall only be in town a week or two longer.’

‘Let me see. I’ve got to run up to Oxford to-morrow, where I shall be for several days; so that I must, I fear, lose the pleasure of seeing you in London this year.’

‘Then come to Endelstow; why not return with us?’

‘I am afraid if I were to come before August I should have to leave again in a day or two. I should be delighted to be with you at the beginning of that month; and I could stay a nice long time. I have thought of going westward all the summer.’

‘Very well. Now remember that’s a compact. And won’t you wait now and see Mr. Swancourt? He will not be away ten minutes longer.’

‘No; I’ll beg to be excused; for I must get to my chambers again this evening before I go home; indeed, I ought to have been there now — I have such a press of matters to attend to just at present. You will explain to him, please. Good-bye.’

‘And let us know the day of your appearance as soon as you can.’

‘I will’

CHAPTER XV

‘A wandering voice.’

Though sheer and intelligible griefs are not charmed away by being confided to mere acquaintances, the process is a palliative to certain ill-humours. Among these, perplexed vexation is one — a species of trouble which, like a stream, gets shallower by the simple operation of widening it in any quarter.

On the evening of the day succeeding that of the meeting in the Park, Elfride and Mrs. Swancourt were engaged in conversation in the dressing-room of the latter. Such a treatment of such a case was in course of adoption here.

Elfride had just before received an affectionate letter from Stephen Smith in Bombay, which had been forwarded to her from Endelstow. But since this is not the case referred to, it is not worth while to pry further into the contents of the letter than to discover that, with rash though pardonable confidence in coming times, he addressed her in high spirits as his darling future wife. Probably there cannot be instanced a briefer and surer rule-of-thumb test of a man’s temperament — sanguine or cautious — than

this: did he or does he ante-date the word wife in corresponding with a sweet-heart he honestly loves?

She had taken this epistle into her own room, read a little of it, then SAVED the rest for to-morrow, not wishing to be so extravagant as to consume the pleasure all at once. Nevertheless, she could not resist the wish to enjoy yet a little more, so out came the letter again, and in spite of misgivings as to prodigality the whole was devoured. The letter was finally reperused and placed in her pocket.

What was this? Also a newspaper for Elfride, which she had overlooked in her hurry to open the letter. It was the old number of the PRESENT, containing the article upon her book, forwarded as had been requested.

Elfride had hastily read it through, shrunk perceptibly smaller, and had then gone with the paper in her hand to Mrs. Swancourt's dressing-room, to lighten or at least modify her vexation by a discriminating estimate from her stepmother.

She was now looking disconsolately out of the window.

'Never mind, my child,' said Mrs. Swancourt after a careful perusal of the matter indicated. 'I don't see that the review is such a terrible one, after all. Besides, everybody has forgotten about it by this time. I'm sure the opening is good enough for any book ever written. Just listen — it sounds better read aloud than when you pore over it silently: "THE COURT OF KELLYON CASTLE. A ROMANCE OF THE MIDDLE AGES. BY ERNEST FIELD. In the belief that we were for a while escaping the monotonous repetition of wearisome details in modern social scenery, analyses of uninteresting character, or the unnatural unfoldings of a sensation plot, we took this volume into our hands with a feeling of pleasure. We were disposed to beguile ourselves with the fancy that some new change might possibly be rung upon donjon keeps, chain and plate armour, deeply scarred cheeks, tender maidens disguised as pages, to which we had not listened long ago." Now, that's a very good beginning, in my opinion, and one to be proud of having brought out of a man who has never seen you.'

'Ah, yes,' murmured Elfride wofully. 'But, then, see further on!'

'Well the next bit is rather unkind, I must own,' said Mrs. Swancourt, and read on. "'Instead of this we found ourselves in the hands of some young lady, hardly arrived at years of discretion, to judge by the silly device it has been thought worth while to adopt on the title-page, with the idea of disguising her sex.'"

'I am not "silly"!'

 said Elfride indignantly. 'He might have called me anything but that.'

'You are not, indeed. Well: — "Hands of a young lady...whose chapters are simply devoted to impossible tournaments, towers, and escapades, which read like flat copies of like scenes in the stories of Mr. G. P. R. James, and the most unreal portions of IVANHOE. The bait is so palpably artificial that the most credulous gudgeon turns away." Now, my dear, I don't see overmuch to complain of in that. It proves that you were clever enough to make him think of Sir Walter Scott, which is a great deal.'

'Oh yes; though I cannot romance myself, I am able to remind him of those who can!' Elfride intended to hurl these words sarcastically at her invisible enemy, but as she

had no more satirical power than a wood-pigeon, they merely fell in a pretty murmur from lips shaped to a pout.

‘Certainly: and that’s something. Your book is good enough to be bad in an ordinary literary manner, and doesn’t stand by itself in a melancholy position altogether worse than assailable. — ”That interest in an historical romance may nowadays have any chance of being sustained, it is indispensable that the reader find himself under the guidance of some nearly extinct species of legendary, who, in addition to an impulse towards antiquarian research and an unweakened faith in the mediaeval halo, shall possess an inventive faculty in which delicacy of sentiment is far overtopped by a power of welding to stirring incident a spirited variety of the elementary human passions.” Well, that long-winded effusion doesn’t refer to you at all, Elfride, merely something put in to fill up. Let me see, when does he come to you again;...not till the very end, actually. Here you are finally polished off:

“But to return to the little work we have used as the text of this article. We are far from altogether disparaging the author’s powers. She has a certain versatility that enables her to use with effect a style of narration peculiar to herself, which may be called a murmuring of delicate emotional trifles, the particular gift of those to whom the social sympathies of a peaceful time are as daily food. Hence, where matters of domestic experience, and the natural touches which make people real, can be introduced without anachronisms too striking, she is occasionally felicitous; and upon the whole we feel justified in saying that the book will bear looking into for the sake of those portions which have nothing whatever to do with the story.”

‘Well, I suppose it is intended for satire; but don’t think anything more of it now, my dear. It is seven o’clock.’ And Mrs. Swancourt rang for her maid.

Attack is more piquant than concord. Stephen’s letter was concerning nothing but oneness with her: the review was the very reverse. And a stranger with neither name nor shape, age nor appearance, but a mighty voice, is naturally rather an interesting novelty to a lady he chooses to address. When Elfride fell asleep that night she was loving the writer of the letter, but thinking of the writer of that article.

CHAPTER XVI

‘Then fancy shapes — as fancy can.’

On a day about three weeks later, the Swancourt trio were sitting quietly in the drawing-room of The Crag, Mrs. Swancourt’s house at Endelstow, chatting, and taking easeful survey of their previous month or two of town — a tangible weariness even to people whose acquaintances there might be counted on the fingers.

A mere season in London with her practised step-mother had so advanced Elfride’s perceptions, that her courtship by Stephen seemed emotionally meagre, and to have drifted back several years into a childish past. In regarding our mental experiences,

as in visual observation, our own progress reads like a dwindling of that we progress from.

She was seated on a low chair, looking over her romance with melancholy interest for the first time since she had become acquainted with the remarks of the PRESENT thereupon.

‘Still thinking of that reviewer, Elfie?’

‘Not of him personally; but I am thinking of his opinion. Really, on looking into the volume after this long time has elapsed, he seems to have estimated one part of it fairly enough.’

‘No, no; I wouldn’t show the white feather now! Fancy that of all people in the world the writer herself should go over to the enemy. How shall Monmouth’s men fight when Monmouth runs away?’

‘I don’t do that. But I think he is right in some of his arguments, though wrong in others. And because he has some claim to my respect I regret all the more that he should think so mistakenly of my motives in one or two instances. It is more vexing to be misunderstood than to be misrepresented; and he misunderstands me. I cannot be easy whilst a person goes to rest night after night attributing to me intentions I never had.’

‘He doesn’t know your name, or anything about you. And he has doubtless forgotten there is such a book in existence by this time.’

‘I myself should certainly like him to be put right upon one or two matters,’ said the vicar, who had hitherto been silent. ‘You see, critics go on writing, and are never corrected or argued with, and therefore are never improved.’

‘Papa,’ said Elfride brightening, ‘write to him!’

‘I would as soon write to him as look at him, for the matter of that,’ said Mr. Swancourt.

‘Do! And say, the young person who wrote the book did not adopt a masculine pseudonym in vanity or conceit, but because she was afraid it would be thought presumptuous to publish her name, and that she did not mean the story for such as he, but as a sweetener of history for young people, who might thereby acquire a taste for what went on in their own country hundreds of years ago, and be tempted to dive deeper into the subject. Oh, there is so much to explain; I wish I might write myself!’

‘Now, Elfie, I’ll tell you what we will do,’ answered Mr. Swancourt, tickled with a sort of bucolic humour at the idea of criticizing the critic. ‘You shall write a clear account of what he is wrong in, and I will copy it and send it as mine.’

‘Yes, now, directly!’ said Elfride, jumping up. ‘When will you send it, papa?’

‘Oh, in a day or two, I suppose,’ he returned. Then the vicar paused and slightly yawned, and in the manner of elderly people began to cool from his ardour for the undertaking now that it came to the point. ‘But, really, it is hardly worth while,’ he said.

‘O papa!’ said Elfride, with much disappointment. ‘You said you would, and now you won’t. That is not fair!’

‘But how can we send it if we don’t know whom to send it to?’

‘If you really want to send such a thing it can easily be done,’ said Mrs. Swancourt, coming to her step-daughter’s rescue. ‘An envelope addressed, “To the Critic of THE COURT OF KELLYON CASTLE, care of the Editor of the PRESENT,” would find him.’

‘Yes, I suppose it would.’

‘Why not write your answer yourself, Elfride?’ Mrs. Swancourt inquired.

‘I might,’ she said hesitatingly; ‘and send it anonymously: that would be treating him as he has treated me.’

‘No use in the world!’

‘But I don’t like to let him know my exact name. Suppose I put my initials only? The less you are known the more you are thought of.’

‘Yes; you might do that.’

Elfride set to work there and then. Her one desire for the last fortnight seemed likely to be realised. As happens with sensitive and secluded minds, a continual dwelling upon the subject had magnified to colossal proportions the space she assumed herself to occupy or to have occupied in the occult critic’s mind. At noon and at night she had been pestering herself with endeavours to perceive more distinctly his conception of her as a woman apart from an author: whether he really despised her; whether he thought more or less of her than of ordinary young women who never ventured into the fire of criticism at all. Now she would have the satisfaction of feeling that at any rate he knew her true intent in crossing his path, and annoying him so by her performance, and be taught perhaps to despise it a little less.

Four days later an envelope, directed to Miss Swancourt in a strange hand, made its appearance from the post-bag.

‘Oh,’ said Elfride, her heart sinking within her. ‘Can it be from that man — a lecture for impertinence? And actually one for Mrs. Swancourt in the same hand-writing!’ She feared to open hers. ‘Yet how can he know my name? No; it is somebody else.’

‘Nonsense!’ said her father grimly. ‘You sent your initials, and the Directory was available. Though he wouldn’t have taken the trouble to look there unless he had been thoroughly savage with you. I thought you wrote with rather more asperity than simple literary discussion required.’ This timely clause was introduced to save the character of the vicar’s judgment under any issue of affairs.

‘Well, here I go,’ said Elfride, desperately tearing open the seal.

‘To be sure, of course,’ exclaimed Mrs. Swancourt; and looking up from her own letter. ‘Christopher, I quite forgot to tell you, when I mentioned that I had seen my distant relative, Harry Knight, that I invited him here for whatever length of time he could spare. And now he says he can come any day in August.’

‘Write, and say the first of the month,’ replied the indiscriminate vicar.

She read on, ‘Goodness me — and that isn’t all. He is actually the reviewer of Elfride’s book. How absurd, to be sure! I had no idea he reviewed novels or had anything to do with the PRESENT. He is a barrister — and I thought he only wrote

in the Quarterlies. Why, Elfride, you have brought about an odd entanglement! What does he say to you?’

Elfride had put down her letter with a dissatisfied flush on her face. ‘I don’t know. The idea of his knowing my name and all about me!...Why, he says nothing particular, only this —

“MY DEAR MADAM, — Though I am sorry that my remarks should have seemed harsh to you, it is a pleasure to find that they have been the means of bringing forth such an ingeniously argued reply. Unfortunately, it is so long since I wrote my review, that my memory does not serve me sufficiently to say a single word in my defence, even supposing there remains one to be said, which is doubtful. You will find from a letter I have written to Mrs. Swancourt, that we are not such strangers to each other as we have been imagining. Possibly, I may have the pleasure of seeing you soon, when any argument you choose to advance shall receive all the attention it deserves.”

‘That is dim sarcasm — I know it is.’

‘Oh no, Elfride.’

‘And then, his remarks didn’t seem harsh — I mean I did not say so.’

‘He thinks you are in a frightful temper,’ said Mr. Swancourt, chuckling in undertones.

‘And he will come and see me, and find the authoress as contemptible in speech as she has been impertinent in manner. I do heartily wish I had never written a word to him!’

‘Never mind,’ said Mrs. Swancourt, also laughing in low quiet jerks; ‘it will make the meeting such a comical affair, and afford splendid by-play for your father and myself. The idea of our running our heads against Harry Knight all the time! I cannot get over that.’

The vicar had immediately remembered the name to be that of Stephen Smith’s preceptor and friend; but having ceased to concern himself in the matter he made no remark to that effect, consistently forbearing to allude to anything which could restore recollection of the (to him) disagreeable mistake with regard to poor Stephen’s lineage and position. Elfride had of course perceived the same thing, which added to the complication of relationship a mesh that her stepmother knew nothing of.

The identification scarcely heightened Knight’s attractions now, though a twelve-month ago she would only have cared to see him for the interest he possessed as Stephen’s friend. Fortunately for Knight’s advent, such a reason for welcome had only begun to be awkward to her at a time when the interest he had acquired on his own account made it no longer necessary.

These coincidences, in common with all relating to him, tended to keep Elfride’s mind upon the stretch concerning Knight. As was her custom when upon the horns of a dilemma, she walked off by herself among the laurel bushes, and there, standing still and splitting up a leaf without removing it from its stalk, fetched back recollections of Stephen’s frequent words in praise of his friend, and wished she had listened more attentively. Then, still pulling the leaf, she would blush at some fancied mortifi-

cation that would accrue to her from his words when they met, in consequence of her intrusiveness, as she now considered it, in writing to him.

The next development of her meditations was the subject of what this man's personal appearance might be — was he tall or short, dark or fair, gay or grim? She would have asked Mrs. Swancourt but for the risk she might thereby incur of some teasing remark being returned. Ultimately Elfride would say, 'Oh, what a plague that reviewer is to me!' and turn her face to where she imagined India lay, and murmur to herself, 'Ah, my little husband, what are you doing now? Let me see, where are you — south, east, where? Behind that hill, ever so far behind!'

CHAPTER XVII

'Her welcome, spoke in faltering phrase.'

'There is Henry Knight, I declare!' said Mrs. Swancourt one day.

They were gazing from the jutting angle of a wild enclosure not far from The Craggs, which almost overhung the valley already described as leading up from the sea and little port of Castle Boterel. The stony escarpment upon which they stood had the contour of a man's face, and it was covered with furze as with a beard. People in the field above were preserved from an accidental roll down these prominences and hollows by a hedge on the very crest, which was doing that kindly service for Elfride and her mother now.

Scrambling higher into the hedge and stretching her neck further over the furze, Elfride beheld the individual signified. He was walking leisurely along the little green path at the bottom, beside the stream, a satchel slung upon his left hip, a stout walking-stick in his hand, and a brown-holland sun-hat upon his head. The satchel was worn and old, and the outer polished surface of the leather was cracked and peeling off.

Knight having arrived over the hills to Castle Boterel upon the top of a crazy omnibus, preferred to walk the remaining two miles up the valley, leaving his luggage to be brought on.

Behind him wandered, helter-skelter, a boy of whom Knight had briefly inquired the way to Endelstow; and by that natural law of physics which causes lesser bodies to gravitate towards the greater, this boy had kept near to Knight, and trotted like a little dog close at his heels, whistling as he went, with his eyes fixed upon Knight's boots as they rose and fell.

When they had reached a point precisely opposite that in which Mrs. and Miss Swancourt lay in ambush, Knight stopped and turned round.

'Look here, my boy,' he said.

The boy parted his lips, opened his eyes, and answered nothing.

'Here's sixpence for you, on condition that you don't again come within twenty yards of my heels, all the way up the valley.'

The boy, who apparently had not known he had been looking at Knight's heels at all, took the sixpence mechanically, and Knight went on again, wrapt in meditation.

'A nice voice,' Elfride thought; 'but what a singular temper!'

'Now we must get indoors before he ascends the slope,' said Mrs. Swancourt softly. And they went across by a short cut over a stile, entering the lawn by a side door, and so on to the house.

Mr. Swancourt had gone into the village with the curate, and Elfride felt too nervous to await their visitor's arrival in the drawing-room with Mrs. Swancourt. So that when the elder lady entered, Elfride made some pretence of perceiving a new variety of crimson geranium, and lingered behind among the flower beds.

There was nothing gained by this, after all, she thought; and a few minutes after boldly came into the house by the glass side-door. She walked along the corridor, and entered the drawing-room. Nobody was there.

A window at the angle of the room opened directly into an octagonal conservatory, enclosing the corner of the building. From the conservatory came voices in conversation — Mrs. Swancourt's and the stranger's.

She had expected him to talk brilliantly. To her surprise he was asking questions in quite a learner's manner, on subjects connected with the flowers and shrubs that she had known for years. When after the lapse of a few minutes he spoke at some length, she considered there was a hard square decisiveness in the shape of his sentences, as if, unlike her own and Stephen's, they were not there and then newly constructed, but were drawn forth from a large store ready-made. They were now approaching the window to come in again.

'That is a flesh-coloured variety,' said Mrs. Swancourt. 'But oleanders, though they are such bulky shrubs, are so very easily wounded as to be unprunable — giants with the sensitiveness of young ladies. Oh, here is Elfride!'

Elfride looked as guilty and crestfallen as Lady Teazle at the dropping of the screen. Mrs. Swancourt presented him half comically, and Knight in a minute or two placed himself beside the young lady.

A complexity of instincts checked Elfride's conventional smiles of complaisance and hospitality; and, to make her still less comfortable, Mrs. Swancourt immediately afterwards left them together to seek her husband. Mr. Knight, however, did not seem at all incommoded by his feelings, and he said with light easefulness:

'So, Miss Swancourt, I have met you at last. You escaped me by a few minutes only when we were in London.'

'Yes. I found that you had seen Mrs. Swancourt.'

'And now reviewer and reviewed are face to face,' he added unconcernedly.

'Yes: though the fact of your being a relation of Mrs. Swancourt's takes off the edge of it. It was strange that you should be one of her family all the time.' Elfride began to recover herself now, and to look into Knight's face. 'I was merely anxious to let you know my REAL meaning in writing the book — extremely anxious.'

'I can quite understand the wish; and I was gratified that my remarks should have reached home. They very seldom do, I am afraid.'

Elfride drew herself in. Here he was, sticking to his opinions as firmly as if friendship and politeness did not in the least require an immediate renunciation of them.

'You made me very uneasy and sorry by writing such things!' she murmured, suddenly dropping the mere cacueterie of a fashionable first introduction, and speaking with some of the dudgeon of a child towards a severe schoolmaster.

'That is rather the object of honest critics in such a case. Not to cause unnecessary sorrow, but: "To make you sorry after a proper manner, that ye may receive damage by us in nothing," as a powerful pen once wrote to the Gentiles. Are you going to write another romance?'

'Write another?' she said. 'That somebody may pen a condemnation and "nail't wi' Scripture" again, as you do now, Mr. Knight?'

'You may do better next time,' he said placidly: 'I think you will. But I would advise you to confine yourself to domestic scenes.'

'Thank you. But never again!'

'Well, you may be right. That a young woman has taken to writing is not by any means the best thing to hear about her.'

'What is the best?'

'I prefer not to say.'

'Do you know? Then, do tell me, please.'

'Well' — (Knight was evidently changing his meaning) — 'I suppose to hear that she has married.'

Elfride hesitated. 'And what when she has been married?' she said at last, partly in order to withdraw her own person from the argument.

'Then to hear no more about her. It is as Smeaton said of his lighthouse: her greatest real praise, when the novelty of her inauguration has worn off, is that nothing happens to keep the talk of her alive.'

'Yes, I see,' said Elfride softly and thoughtfully. 'But of course it is different quite with men. Why don't you write novels, Mr. Knight?'

'Because I couldn't write one that would interest anybody.'

'Why?'

'For several reasons. It requires a judicious omission of your real thoughts to make a novel popular, for one thing.'

'Is that really necessary? Well, I am sure you could learn to do that with practice,' said Elfride with an ex-cathedra air, as became a person who spoke from experience in the art. 'You would make a great name for certain,' she continued.

'So many people make a name nowadays, that it is more distinguished to remain in obscurity.'

'Tell me seriously — apart from the subject — why don't you write a volume instead of loose articles?' she insisted.

‘Since you are pleased to make me talk of myself, I will tell you seriously,’ said Knight, not less amused at this catechism by his young friend than he was interested in her appearance. ‘As I have implied, I have not the wish. And if I had the wish, I could not now concentrate sufficiently. We all have only our one cruse of energy given us to make the best of. And where that energy has been leaked away week by week, quarter by quarter, as mine has for the last nine or ten years, there is not enough dammed back behind the mill at any given period to supply the force a complete book on any subject requires. Then there is the self-confidence and waiting power. Where quick results have grown customary, they are fatal to a lively faith in the future.’

‘Yes, I comprehend; and so you choose to write in fragments?’

‘No, I don’t choose to do it in the sense you mean; choosing from a whole world of professions, all possible. It was by the constraint of accident merely. Not that I object to the accident.’

‘Why don’t you object — I mean, why do you feel so quiet about things?’ Elfride was half afraid to question him so, but her intense curiosity to see what the inside of literary Mr. Knight was like, kept her going on.

Knight certainly did not mind being frank with her. Instances of this trait in men who are not without feeling, but are reticent from habit, may be recalled by all of us. When they find a listener who can by no possibility make use of them, rival them, or condemn them, reserved and even suspicious men of the world become frank, keenly enjoying the inner side of their frankness.

‘Why I don’t mind the accidental constraint,’ he replied, ‘is because, in making beginnings, a chance limitation of direction is often better than absolute freedom.’

‘I see — that is, I should if I quite understood what all those generalities mean.’

‘Why, this: That an arbitrary foundation for one’s work, which no length of thought can alter, leaves the attention free to fix itself on the work itself, and make the best of it.’

‘Lateral compression forcing altitude, as would be said in that tongue,’ she said mischievously. ‘And I suppose where no limit exists, as in the case of a rich man with a wide taste who wants to do something, it will be better to choose a limit capriciously than to have none.’

‘Yes,’ he said meditatively. ‘I can go as far as that.’

‘Well,’ resumed Elfride, ‘I think it better for a man’s nature if he does nothing in particular.’

‘There is such a case as being obliged to.’

‘Yes, yes; I was speaking of when you are not obliged for any other reason than delight in the prospect of fame. I have thought many times lately that a thin widespread happiness, commencing now, and of a piece with the days of your life, is preferable to an anticipated heap far away in the future, and none now.’

‘Why, that’s the very thing I said just now as being the principle of all ephemeral doers like myself.’

‘Oh, I am sorry to have parodied you,’ she said with some confusion. ‘Yes, of course. That is what you meant about not trying to be famous.’ And she added, with the quickness of conviction characteristic of her mind: ‘There is much littleness in trying to be great. A man must think a good deal of himself, and be conceited enough to believe in himself, before he tries at all.’

‘But it is soon enough to say there is harm in a man’s thinking a good deal of himself when it is proved he has been thinking wrong, and too soon then sometimes. Besides, we should not conclude that a man who strives earnestly for success does so with a strong sense of his own merit. He may see how little success has to do with merit, and his motive may be his very humility.’

This manner of treating her rather provoked Elfride. No sooner did she agree with him than he ceased to seem to wish it, and took the other side. ‘Ah,’ she thought inwardly, ‘I shall have nothing to do with a man of this kind, though he is our visitor.’

‘I think you will find,’ resumed Knight, pursuing the conversation more for the sake of finishing off his thoughts on the subject than for engaging her attention, ‘that in actual life it is merely a matter of instinct with men — this trying to push on. They awake to a recognition that they have, without premeditation, begun to try a little, and they say to themselves, “Since I have tried thus much, I will try a little more.” They go on because they have begun.’

Elfride, in her turn, was not particularly attending to his words at this moment. She had, unconsciously to herself, a way of seizing any point in the remarks of an interlocutor which interested her, and dwelling upon it, and thinking thoughts of her own thereupon, totally oblivious of all that he might say in continuation. On such occasions she artlessly surveyed the person speaking; and then there was a time for a painter. Her eyes seemed to look at you, and past you, as you were then, into your future; and past your future into your eternity — not reading it, but gazing in an unused, unconscious way — her mind still clinging to its original thought.

This is how she was looking at Knight.

Suddenly Elfride became conscious of what she was doing, and was painfully confused.

‘What were you so intent upon in me?’ he inquired.

‘As far as I was thinking of you at all, I was thinking how clever you are,’ she said, with a want of premeditation that was startling in its honesty and simplicity.

Feeling restless now that she had so unwittingly spoken, she arose and stepped to the window, having heard the voices of her father and Mrs. Swancourt coming up below the terrace. ‘Here they are,’ she said, going out. Knight walked out upon the lawn behind her. She stood upon the edge of the terrace, close to the stone balustrade, and looked towards the sun, hanging over a glade just now fair as Tempe’s vale, up which her father was walking.

Knight could not help looking at her. The sun was within ten degrees of the horizon, and its warm light flooded her face and heightened the bright rose colour of her cheeks to a vermilion red, their moderate pink hue being only seen in its natural tone where

the cheek curved round into shadow. The ends of her hanging hair softly dragged themselves backwards and forwards upon her shoulder as each faint breeze thrust against or relinquished it. Fringes and ribbons of her dress, moved by the same breeze, licked like tongues upon the parts around them, and fluttering forward from shady folds caught likewise their share of the lustrous orange glow.

Mr. Swancourt shouted out a welcome to Knight from a distance of about thirty yards, and after a few preliminary words proceeded to a conversation of deep earnestness on Knight's fine old family name, and theories as to lineage and intermarriage connected therewith. Knight's portmanteau having in the meantime arrived, they soon retired to prepare for dinner, which had been postponed two hours later than the usual time of that meal.

An arrival was an event in the life of Elfride, now that they were again in the country, and that of Knight necessarily an engrossing one. And that evening she went to bed for the first time without thinking of Stephen at all.

CHAPTER XVIII

'He heard her musical pants.'

The old tower of West Endelstow Church had reached the last weeks of its existence. It was to be replaced by a new one from the designs of Mr. Hewby, the architect who had sent down Stephen. Planks and poles had arrived in the churchyard, iron bars had been thrust into the venerable crack extending down the belfry wall to the foundation, the bells had been taken down, the owls had forsaken this home of their forefathers, and six iconoclasts in white fustian, to whom a cracked edifice was a species of Mumbo Jumbo, had taken lodgings in the village previous to beginning the actual removal of the stones.

This was the day after Knight's arrival. To enjoy for the last time the prospect seaward from the summit, the vicar, Mrs. Swancourt, Knight, and Elfride, all ascended the winding turret — Mr. Swancourt stepping forward with many loud breaths, his wife struggling along silently, but suffering none the less. They had hardly reached the top when a large lurid cloud, palpably a reservoir of rain, thunder, and lightning, was seen to be advancing overhead from the north.

The two cautious elders suggested an immediate return, and proceeded to put it in practice as regarded themselves.

'Dear me, I wish I had not come up,' exclaimed Mrs. Swancourt.

'We shall be slower than you two in going down,' the vicar said over his shoulder, 'and so, don't you start till we are nearly at the bottom, or you will run over us and break our necks somewhere in the darkness of the turret.'

Accordingly Elfride and Knight waited on the leads till the staircase should be clear. Knight was not in a talkative mood that morning. Elfride was rather wilful, by reason of his inattention, which she privately set down to his thinking her not worth talking to.

Whilst Knight stood watching the rise of the cloud, she sauntered to the other side of the tower, and there remembered a giddy feat she had performed the year before. It was to walk round upon the parapet of the tower — which was quite without battlement or pinnacle, and presented a smooth flat surface about two feet wide, forming a pathway on all the four sides. Without reflecting in the least upon what she was doing she now stepped upon the parapet in the old way, and began walking along.

‘We are down, cousin Henry,’ cried Mrs. Swancourt up the turret. ‘Follow us when you like.’

Knight turned and saw Elfride beginning her elevated promenade. His face flushed with mingled concern and anger at her rashness.

‘I certainly gave you credit for more common sense,’ he said.

She reddened a little and walked on.

‘Miss Swancourt, I insist upon your coming down,’ he exclaimed.

‘I will in a minute. I am safe enough. I have done it often.’

At that moment, by reason of a slight perturbation his words had caused in her, Elfride’s foot caught itself in a little tuft of grass growing in a joint of the stone-work, and she almost lost her balance. Knight sprang forward with a face of horror. By what seemed the special interposition of a considerate Providence she tottered to the inner edge of the parapet instead of to the outer, and reeled over upon the lead roof two or three feet below the wall.

Knight seized her as in a vice, and he said, panting, ‘That ever I should have met a woman fool enough to do a thing of that kind! Good God, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!’

The close proximity of the Shadow of Death had made her sick and pale as a corpse before he spoke. Already lowered to that state, his words completely over-powered her, and she swooned away as he held her.

Elfride’s eyes were not closed for more than forty seconds. She opened them, and remembered the position instantly. His face had altered its expression from stern anger to pity. But his severe remarks had rather frightened her, and she struggled to be free.

‘If you can stand, of course you may,’ he said, and loosened his arms. ‘I hardly know whether most to laugh at your freak or to chide you for its folly.’

She immediately sank upon the lead-work. Knight lifted her again. ‘Are you hurt?’ he said.

She murmured an incoherent expression, and tried to smile; saying, with a fitful aversion of her face, ‘I am only frightened. Put me down, do put me down!’

‘But you can’t walk,’ said Knight.

‘You don’t know that; how can you? I am only frightened, I tell you,’ she answered petulantly, and raised her hand to her forehead. Knight then saw that she was bleeding from a severe cut in her wrist, apparently where it had descended upon a salient corner of the lead-work. Elfride, too, seemed to perceive and feel this now for the first time, and for a minute nearly lost consciousness again. Knight rapidly bound his

handkerchief round the place, and to add to the complication, the thundercloud he had been watching began to shed some heavy drops of rain. Knight looked up and saw the vicar striding towards the house, and Mrs. Swancourt waddling beside him like a hard-driven duck.

‘As you are so faint, it will be much better to let me carry you down,’ said Knight; ‘or at any rate inside out of the rain.’ But her objection to be lifted made it impossible for him to support her for more than five steps.

‘This is folly, great folly,’ he exclaimed, setting her down.

‘Indeed!’ she murmured, with tears in her eyes. ‘I say I will not be carried, and you say this is folly!’

‘So it is.’

‘No, it isn’t!’

‘It is folly, I think. At any rate, the origin of it all is.’

‘I don’t agree to it. And you needn’t get so angry with me; I am not worth it.’

‘Indeed you are. You are worth the enmity of princes, as was said of such another. Now, then, will you clasp your hands behind my neck, that I may carry you down without hurting you?’

‘No, no.’

‘You had better, or I shall foreclose.’

‘What’s that!’

‘Deprive you of your chance.’

Elfride gave a little toss.

‘Now, don’t writhe so when I attempt to carry you.’

‘I can’t help it.’

‘Then submit quietly.’

‘I don’t care. I don’t care,’ she murmured in languid tones and with closed eyes.

He took her into his arms, entered the turret, and with slow and cautious steps descended round and round. Then, with the gentleness of a nursing mother, he attended to the cut on her arm. During his progress through the operations of wiping it and binding it up anew, her face changed its aspect from pained indifference to something like bashful interest, interspersed with small tremors and shudders of a trifling kind.

In the centre of each pale cheek a small red spot the size of a wafer had now made its appearance, and continued to grow larger. Elfride momentarily expected a recurrence to the lecture on her foolishness, but Knight said no more than this —

‘Promise me NEVER to walk on that parapet again.’

‘It will be pulled down soon: so I do.’ In a few minutes she continued in a lower tone, and seriously, ‘You are familiar of course, as everybody is, with those strange sensations we sometimes have, that our life for the moment exists in duplicate.’

‘That we have lived through that moment before?’

‘Or shall again. Well, I felt on the tower that something similar to that scene is again to be common to us both.’

‘God forbid!’ said Knight. ‘Promise me that you will never again walk on any such place on any consideration.’

‘I do.’

‘That such a thing has not been before, we know. That it shall not be again, you vow. Therefore think no more of such a foolish fancy.’

There had fallen a great deal of rain, but unaccompanied by lightning. A few minutes longer, and the storm had ceased.

‘Now, take my arm, please.’

‘Oh no, it is not necessary.’ This relapse into wilfulness was because he had again connected the epithet foolish with her.

‘Nonsense: it is quite necessary; it will rain again directly, and you are not half recovered.’ And without more ado Knight took her hand, drew it under his arm, and held it there so firmly that she could not have removed it without a struggle. Feeling like a colt in a halter for the first time, at thus being led along, yet afraid to be angry, it was to her great relief that she saw the carriage coming round the corner to fetch them.

Her fall upon the roof was necessarily explained to some extent upon their entering the house; but both forbore to mention a word of what she had been doing to cause such an accident. During the remainder of the afternoon Elfride was invisible; but at dinner-time she appeared as bright as ever.

In the drawing-room, after having been exclusively engaged with Mr. and Mrs. Swancourt through the intervening hour, Knight again found himself thrown with Elfride. She had been looking over a chess problem in one of the illustrated periodicals.

‘You like chess, Miss Swancourt?’

‘Yes. It is my favourite scientific game; indeed, excludes every other. Do you play?’

‘I have played; though not lately.’

‘Challenge him, Elfride,’ said the vicar heartily. ‘She plays very well for a lady, Mr. Knight.’

‘Shall we play?’ asked Elfride tentatively.

‘Oh, certainly. I shall be delighted.’

The game began. Mr. Swancourt had forgotten a similar performance with Stephen Smith the year before. Elfride had not; but she had begun to take for her maxim the undoubted truth that the necessity of continuing faithful to Stephen, without suspicion, dictated a fickle behaviour almost as imperatively as fickleness itself; a fact, however, which would give a startling advantage to the latter quality should it ever appear.

Knight, by one of those inexcusable oversights which will sometimes afflict the best of players, placed his rook in the arms of one of her pawns. It was her first advantage. She looked triumphant — even ruthless.

‘By George! what was I thinking of?’ said Knight quietly; and then dismissed all concern at his accident.

‘Club laws we’ll have, won’t we, Mr. Knight?’ said Elfride suavely.

‘Oh yes, certainly,’ said Mr. Knight, a thought, however, just occurring to his mind, that he had two or three times allowed her to replace a man on her religiously assuring him that such a move was an absolute blunder.

She immediately took up the unfortunate rook and the contest proceeded, Elfride having now rather the better of the game. Then he won the exchange, regained his position, and began to press her hard. Elfride grew flurried, and placed her queen on his remaining rook’s file.

‘There — how stupid! Upon my word, I did not see your rook. Of course nobody but a fool would have put a queen there knowingly!’

She spoke excitedly, half expecting her antagonist to give her back the move.

‘Nobody, of course,’ said Knight serenely, and stretched out his hand towards his royal victim.

‘It is not very pleasant to have it taken advantage of, then,’ she said with some vexation.

‘Club laws, I think you said?’ returned Knight blandly, and mercilessly appropriating the queen.

She was on the brink of pouting, but was ashamed to show it; tears almost stood in her eyes. She had been trying so hard — so very hard — thinking and thinking till her brain was in a whirl; and it seemed so heartless of him to treat her so, after all.

‘I think it is — — ’ she began.

‘What?’

— ‘Unkind to take advantage of a pure mistake I make in that way.’

‘I lost my rook by even a purer mistake,’ said the enemy in an inexorable tone, without lifting his eyes.

‘Yes, but — — ’ However, as his logic was absolutely unanswerable, she merely registered a protest. ‘I cannot endure those cold-blooded ways of clubs and professional players, like Staunton and Morphy. Just as if it really mattered whether you have raised your fingers from a man or no!’

Knight smiled as pitilessly as before, and they went on in silence.

‘Checkmate,’ said Knight.

‘Another game,’ said Elfride preemptorily, and looking very warm.

‘With all my heart,’ said Knight.

‘Checkmate,’ said Knight again at the end of forty minutes.

‘Another game,’ she returned resolutely.

‘I’ll give you the odds of a bishop,’ Knight said to her kindly.

‘No, thank you,’ Elfride replied in a tone intended for courteous indifference; but, as a fact, very cavalier indeed.

‘Checkmate,’ said her opponent without the least emotion.

Oh, the difference between Elfride’s condition of mind now, and when she purposely made blunders that Stephen Smith might win!

It was bedtime. Her mind as distracted as if it would throb itself out of her head, she went off to her chamber, full of mortification at being beaten time after time when

she herself was the aggressor. Having for two or three years enjoyed the reputation throughout the globe of her father's brain — which almost constituted her entire world — of being an excellent player, this fiasco was intolerable; for unfortunately the person most dogged in the belief in a false reputation is always that one, the possessor, who has the best means of knowing that it is not true.

In bed no sleep came to soothe her; that gentle thing being the very middle-of-summer friend in this respect of flying away at the merest troublous cloud. After lying awake till two o'clock an idea seemed to strike her. She softly arose, got a light, and fetched a Chess Praxis from the library. Returning and sitting up in bed, she diligently studied the volume till the clock struck five, and her eyelids felt thick and heavy. She then extinguished the light and lay down again.

'You look pale, Elfride,' said Mrs. Swancourt the next morning at breakfast. 'Isn't she, cousin Harry?'

A young girl who is scarcely ill at all can hardly help becoming so when regarded as such by all eyes turning upon her at the table in obedience to some remark. Everybody looked at Elfride. She certainly was pale.

'Am I pale?' she said with a faint smile. 'I did not sleep much. I could not get rid of armies of bishops and knights, try how I would.'

'Chess is a bad thing just before bedtime; especially for excitable people like yourself, dear. Don't ever play late again.'

'I'll play early instead. Cousin Knight,' she said in imitation of Mrs. Swancourt, 'will you oblige me in something?'

'Even to half my kingdom.'

'Well, it is to play one game more.'

'When?'

'Now, instantly; the moment we have breakfasted.'

'Nonsense, Elfride,' said her father. 'Making yourself a slave to the game like that.'

'But I want to, papa! Honestly, I am restless at having been so ignominiously overcome. And Mr. Knight doesn't mind. So what harm can there be?'

'Let us play, by all means, if you wish it,' said Knight.

So, when breakfast was over, the combatants withdrew to the quiet of the library, and the door was closed. Elfride seemed to have an idea that her conduct was rather ill-regulated and startlingly free from conventional restraint. And worse, she fancied upon Knight's face a slightly amused look at her proceedings.

'You think me foolish, I suppose,' she said recklessly; 'but I want to do my very best just once, and see whether I can overcome you.'

'Certainly: nothing more natural. Though I am afraid it is not the plan adopted by women of the world after a defeat.'

'Why, pray?'

'Because they know that as good as overcoming is skill in effacing recollection of being overcome, and turn their attention to that entirely.'

'I am wrong again, of course.'

‘Perhaps your wrong is more pleasing than their right.’

‘I don’t quite know whether you mean that, or whether you are laughing at me,’ she said, looking doubtingly at him, yet inclining to accept the more flattering interpretation. ‘I am almost sure you think it vanity in me to think I am a match for you. Well, if you do, I say that vanity is no crime in such a case.’

‘Well, perhaps not. Though it is hardly a virtue.’

‘Oh yes, in battle! Nelson’s bravery lay in his vanity.’

‘Indeed! Then so did his death.’

Oh no, no! For it is written in the book of the prophet Shakespeare —

“Fear and be slain? no worse can come to fight;

And fight and die, is death destroying death!”

And down they sat, and the contest began, Elfride having the first move. The game progressed. Elfride’s heart beat so violently that she could not sit still. Her dread was lest he should hear it. And he did discover it at last — some flowers upon the table being set throbbing by its pulsations.

‘I think we had better give over,’ said Knight, looking at her gently. ‘It is too much for you, I know. Let us write down the position, and finish another time.’

‘No, please not,’ she implored. ‘I should not rest if I did not know the result at once. It is your move.’

Ten minutes passed.

She started up suddenly. ‘I know what you are doing?’ she cried, an angry colour upon her cheeks, and her eyes indignant. ‘You were thinking of letting me win to please me!’

‘I don’t mind owning that I was,’ Knight responded phlegmatically, and appearing all the more so by contrast with her own turmoil.

‘But you must not! I won’t have it.’

‘Very well.’

‘No, that will not do; I insist that you promise not to do any such absurd thing. It is insulting me!’

‘Very well, madam. I won’t do any such absurd thing. You shall not win.’

‘That is to be proved!’ she returned proudly; and the play went on.

Nothing is now heard but the ticking of a quaint old timepiece on the summit of a bookcase. Ten minutes pass; he captures her knight; she takes his knight, and looks a very Rhadamanthus.

More minutes tick away; she takes his pawn and has the advantage, showing her sense of it rather prominently.

Five minutes more: he takes her bishop: she brings things even by taking his knight.

Three minutes: she looks bold, and takes his queen: he looks placid, and takes hers.

Eight or ten minutes pass: he takes a pawn; she utters a little pooh! but not the ghost of a pawn can she take in retaliation.

Ten minutes pass: he takes another pawn and says, 'Check!' She flushes, extricates herself by capturing his bishop, and looks triumphant. He immediately takes her bishop: she looks surprised.

Five minutes longer: she makes a dash and takes his only remaining bishop; he replies by taking her only remaining knight.

Two minutes: he gives check; her mind is now in a painful state of tension, and she shades her face with her hand.

Yet a few minutes more: he takes her rook and checks again. She literally trembles now lest an artful surprise she has in store for him shall be anticipated by the artful surprise he evidently has in store for her.

Five minutes: 'Checkmate in two moves!' exclaims Elfride.

'If you can,' says Knight.

'Oh, I have miscalculated; that is cruel!'

'Checkmate,' says Knight; and the victory is won.

Elfride arose and turned away without letting him see her face. Once in the hall she ran upstairs and into her room, and flung herself down upon her bed, weeping bitterly.

'Where is Elfride?' said her father at luncheon.

Knight listened anxiously for the answer. He had been hoping to see her again before this time.

'She isn't well, sir,' was the reply.

Mrs. Swancourt rose and left the room, going upstairs to Elfride's apartment.

At the door was Unity, who occupied in the new establishment a position between young lady's maid and middle-housemaid.

'She is sound asleep, ma'am,' Unity whispered.

Mrs. Swancourt opened the door. Elfride was lying full-dressed on the bed, her face hot and red, her arms thrown abroad. At intervals of a minute she tossed restlessly from side to side, and indistinctly moaned words used in the game of chess.

Mrs. Swancourt had a turn for doctoring, and felt her pulse. It was twanging like a harp-string, at the rate of nearly a hundred and fifty a minute. Softly moving the sleeping girl to a little less cramped position, she went downstairs again.

'She is asleep now,' said Mrs. Swancourt. 'She does not seem very well. Cousin Knight, what were you thinking of? her tender brain won't bear cudgelling like your great head. You should have strictly forbidden her to play again.'

In truth, the essayist's experience of the nature of young women was far less extensive than his abstract knowledge of them led himself and others to believe. He could pack them into sentences like a workman, but practically was nowhere.

'I am indeed sorry,' said Knight, feeling even more than he expressed. 'But surely, the young lady knows best what is good for her!'

'Bless you, that's just what she doesn't know. She never thinks of such things, does she, Christopher? Her father and I have to command her and keep her in order, as you would a child. She will say things worthy of a French epigrammatist, and act like

a robin in a greenhouse. But I think we will send for Dr. Granson — there can be no harm.'

A man was straightway despatched on horseback to Castle Boterel, and the gentleman known as Dr. Granson came in the course of the afternoon. He pronounced her nervous system to be in a decided state of disorder; forwarded some soothing draught, and gave orders that on no account whatever was she to play chess again.

The next morning Knight, much vexed with himself, waited with a curiously compounded feeling for her entry to breakfast. The women servants came in to prayers at irregular intervals, and as each entered, he could not, to save his life, avoid turning his head with the hope that she might be Elfride. Mr. Swancourt began reading without waiting for her. Then somebody glided in noiselessly; Knight softly glanced up: it was only the little kitchen-maid. Knight thought reading prayers a bore.

He went out alone, and for almost the first time failed to recognize that holding converse with Nature's charms was not solitude. On nearing the house again he perceived his young friend crossing a slope by a path which ran into the one he was following in the angle of the field. Here they met. Elfride was at once exultant and abashed: coming into his presence had upon her the effect of entering a cathedral.

Knight had his note-book in his hand, and had, in fact, been in the very act of writing therein when they came in view of each other. He left off in the midst of a sentence, and proceeded to inquire warmly concerning her state of health. She said she was perfectly well, and indeed had never looked better. Her health was as inconsequent as her actions. Her lips were red, WITHOUT the polish that cherries have, and their redness margined with the white skin in a clearly defined line, which had nothing of jagged confusion in it. Altogether she stood as the last person in the world to be knocked over by a game of chess, because too ephemeral-looking to play one.

'Are you taking notes?' she inquired with an alacrity plainly arising less from interest in the subject than from a wish to divert his thoughts from herself.

'Yes; I was making an entry. And with your permission I will complete it.' Knight then stood still and wrote. Elfride remained beside him a moment, and afterwards walked on.

'I should like to see all the secrets that are in that book,' she gaily flung back to him over her shoulder.

'I don't think you would find much to interest you.'

'I know I should.'

'Then of course I have no more to say.'

'But I would ask this question first. Is it a book of mere facts concerning journeys and expenditure, and so on, or a book of thoughts?'

'Well, to tell the truth, it is not exactly either. It consists for the most part of jottings for articles and essays, disjointed and disconnected, of no possible interest to anybody but myself.'

'It contains, I suppose, your developed thoughts in embryo?'

'Yes.'

‘If they are interesting when enlarged to the size of an article, what must they be in their concentrated form? Pure rectified spirit, above proof; before it is lowered to be fit for human consumption: “words that burn” indeed.’

‘Rather like a balloon before it is inflated: flabby, shapeless, dead. You could hardly read them.’

‘May I try?’ she said coaxingly. ‘I wrote my poor romance in that way — I mean in bits, out of doors — and I should like to see whether your way of entering things is the same as mine.’

‘Really, that’s rather an awkward request. I suppose I can hardly refuse now you have asked so directly; but — — ’

‘You think me ill-mannered in asking. But does not this justify me — your writing in my presence, Mr. Knight? If I had lighted upon your book by chance, it would have been different; but you stand before me, and say, “Excuse me,” without caring whether I do or not, and write on, and then tell me they are not private facts but public ideas.’

‘Very well, Miss Swancourt. If you really must see, the consequences be upon your own head. Remember, my advice to you is to leave my book alone.’

‘But with that caution I have your permission?’

‘Yes.’

She hesitated a moment, looked at his hand containing the book, then laughed, and saying, ‘I must see it,’ withdrew it from his fingers.

Knight rambled on towards the house, leaving her standing in the path turning over the leaves. By the time he had reached the wicket-gate he saw that she had moved, and waited till she came up.

Elfride had closed the note-book, and was carrying it disdainfully by the corner between her finger and thumb; her face wore a nettled look. She silently extended the volume towards him, raising her eyes no higher than her hand was lifted.

‘Take it,’ said Elfride quickly. ‘I don’t want to read it.’

‘Could you understand it?’ said Knight.

‘As far as I looked. But I didn’t care to read much.’

‘Why, Miss Swancourt?’

‘Only because I didn’t wish to — that’s all.’

‘I warned you that you might not.’

‘Yes, but I never supposed you would have put me there.’

‘Your name is not mentioned once within the four corners.’

‘Not my name — I know that.’

‘Nor your description, nor anything by which anybody would recognize you.’

‘Except myself. For what is this?’ she exclaimed, taking it from him and opening a page. ‘August 7. That’s the day before yesterday. But I won’t read it,’ Elfride said, closing the book again with pretty hauteur. ‘Why should I? I had no business to ask to see your book, and it serves me right.’

Knight hardly recollected what he had written, and turned over the book to see. He came to this:

‘Aug. 7. Girl gets into her teens, and her self-consciousness is born. After a certain interval passed in infantine helplessness it begins to act. Simple, young, and inexperienced at first. Persons of observation can tell to a nicety how old this consciousness is by the skill it has acquired in the art necessary to its success — the art of hiding itself. Generally begins career by actions which are popularly termed showing-off. Method adopted depends in each case upon the disposition, rank, residence, of the young lady attempting it. Town-bred girl will utter some moral paradox on fast men, or love. Country miss adopts the more material media of taking a ghastly fence, whistling, or making your blood run cold by appearing to risk her neck. (MEM. On Endelstow Tower.)

‘An innocent vanity is of course the origin of these displays. “Look at me,” say these youthful beginners in womanly artifice, without reflecting whether or not it be to their advantage to show so very much of themselves. (Amplify and correct for paper on Artless Arts.)’

‘Yes, I remember now,’ said Knight. ‘The notes were certainly suggested by your manoeuvre on the church tower. But you must not think too much of such random observations,’ he continued encouragingly, as he noticed her injured looks. ‘A mere fancy passing through my head assumes a factitious importance to you, because it has been made permanent by being written down. All mankind think thoughts as bad as those of people they most love on earth, but such thoughts never getting embodied on paper, it becomes assumed that they never existed. I daresay that you yourself have thought some disagreeable thing or other of me, which would seem just as bad as this if written. I challenge you, now, to tell me.’

‘The worst thing I have thought of you?’

‘Yes.’

‘I must not.’

‘Oh yes.’

‘I thought you were rather round-shouldered.’

Knight looked slightly redder.

‘And that there was a little bald spot on the top of your head.’

‘Heh-heh! Two ineradicable defects,’ said Knight, there being a faint ghastliness discernible in his laugh. ‘They are much worse in a lady’s eye than being thought self-conscious, I suppose.’

‘Ah, that’s very fine,’ she said, too inexperienced to perceive her hit, and hence not quite disposed to forgive his notes. ‘You alluded to me in that entry as if I were such a child, too. Everybody does that. I cannot understand it. I am quite a woman, you know. How old do you think I am?’

‘How old? Why, seventeen, I should say. All girls are seventeen.’

‘You are wrong. I am nearly nineteen. Which class of women do you like best, those who seem younger, or those who seem older than they are?’

‘Off-hand I should be inclined to say those who seem older.’

So it was not Elfride’s class.

‘But it is well known,’ she said eagerly, and there was something touching in the artless anxiety to be thought much of which she revealed by her words, ‘that the slower a nature is to develop, the richer the nature. Youths and girls who are men and women before they come of age are nobodies by the time that backward people have shown their full compass.’

‘Yes,’ said Knight thoughtfully. ‘There is really something in that remark. But at the risk of offence I must remind you that you there take it for granted that the woman behind her time at a given age has not reached the end of her tether. Her backwardness may be not because she is slow to develop, but because she soon exhausted her capacity for developing.’

Elfride looked disappointed. By this time they were indoors. Mrs. Swancourt, to whom match-making by any honest means was meat and drink, had now a little scheme of that nature concerning this pair. The morning-room, in which they both expected to find her, was empty; the old lady having, for the above reason, vacated it by the second door as they entered by the first.

Knight went to the chimney-piece, and carelessly surveyed two portraits on ivory.

‘Though these pink ladies had very rudimentary features, judging by what I see here,’ he observed, ‘they had unquestionably beautiful heads of hair.’

‘Yes; and that is everything,’ said Elfride, possibly conscious of her own, possibly not.

‘Not everything; though a great deal, certainly.’

‘Which colour do you like best?’ she ventured to ask.

‘More depends on its abundance than on its colour.’

‘Abundances being equal, may I inquire your favourite colour?’

‘Dark.’

‘I mean for women,’ she said, with the minutest fall of countenance, and a hope that she had been misunderstood.

‘So do I,’ Knight replied.

It was impossible for any man not to know the colour of Elfride’s hair. In women who wear it plainly such a feature may be overlooked by men not given to ocular intentness. But hers was always in the way. You saw her hair as far as you could see her sex, and knew that it was the palest brown. She knew instantly that Knight, being perfectly aware of this, had an independent standard of admiration in the matter.

Elfride was thoroughly vexed. She could not but be struck with the honesty of his opinions, and the worst of it was, that the more they went against her, the more she respected them. And now, like a reckless gambler, she hazarded her last and best treasure. Her eyes: they were her all now.

‘What coloured eyes do you like best, Mr. Knight?’ she said slowly.

‘Honestly, or as a compliment?’

‘Of course honestly; I don’t want anybody’s compliment!’

And yet Elfride knew otherwise: that a compliment or word of approval from that man then would have been like a well to a famished Arab.

'I prefer hazel,' he said serenely.
She had played and lost again.

CHAPTER XIX

'Love was in the next degree.'

Knight had none of those light familiarities of speech which, by judicious touches of epigrammatic flattery, obliterate a woman's recollection of the speaker's abstract opinions. So no more was said by either on the subject of hair, eyes, or development. Elfride's mind had been impregnated with sentiments of her own smallness to an uncomfortable degree of distinctness, and her discomfort was visible in her face. The whole tendency of the conversation latterly had been to quietly but surely disparage her; and she was fain to take Stephen into favour in self-defence. He would not have been so unloving, she said, as to admire an idiosyncrasy and features different from her own. True, Stephen had declared he loved her: Mr. Knight had never done anything of the sort. Somehow this did not mend matters, and the sensation of her smallness in Knight's eyes still remained. Had the position been reversed — had Stephen loved her in spite of a differing taste, and had Knight been indifferent in spite of her resemblance to his ideal, it would have engendered far happier thoughts. As matters stood, Stephen's admiration might have its root in a blindness the result of passion. Perhaps any keen man's judgment was condemnatory of her.

During the remainder of Saturday they were more or less thrown with their seniors, and no conversation arose which was exclusively their own. When Elfride was in bed that night her thoughts recurred to the same subject. At one moment she insisted that it was ill-natured of him to speak so decisively as he had done; the next, that it was sterling honesty.

'Ah, what a poor nobody I am!' she said, sighing. 'People like him, who go about the great world, don't care in the least what I am like either in mood or feature.'

Perhaps a man who has got thoroughly into a woman's mind in this manner, is half way to her heart; the distance between those two stations is proverbially short.

'And are you really going away this week?' said Mrs. Swancourt to Knight on the following evening, which was Sunday.

They were all leisurely climbing the hill to the church, where a last service was now to be held at the rather exceptional time of evening instead of in the afternoon, previous to the demolition of the ruinous portions.

'I am intending to cross to Cork from Bristol,' returned Knight; 'and then I go on to Dublin.'

'Return this way, and stay a little longer with us,' said the vicar. 'A week is nothing. We have hardly been able to realise your presence yet. I remember a story which — —
,

The vicar suddenly stopped. He had forgotten it was Sunday, and would probably have gone on in his week-day mode of thought had not a turn in the breeze blown the skirt of his college gown within the range of his vision, and so reminded him. He at once diverted the current of his narrative with the dexterity the occasion demanded.

‘The story of the Levite who journeyed to Bethlehem-judah, from which I took my text the Sunday before last, is quite to the point,’ he continued, with the pronounciation of a man who, far from having intended to tell a week-day story a moment earlier, had thought of nothing but Sabbath matters for several weeks. ‘What did he gain after all by his restlessness? Had he remained in the city of the Jebusites, and not been so anxious for Gibeah, none of his troubles would have arisen.’

‘But he had wasted five days already,’ said Knight, closing his eyes to the vicar’s commendable diversion. ‘His fault lay in beginning the tarrying system originally.’

‘True, true; my illustration fails.’

‘But not the hospitality which prompted the story.’

‘So you are to come just the same,’ urged Mrs. Swancourt, for she had seen an almost imperceptible fall of countenance in her stepdaughter at Knight’s announcement.

Knight half promised to call on his return journey; but the uncertainty with which he spoke was quite enough to fill Elfride with a regretful interest in all he did during the few remaining hours. The curate having already officiated twice that day in the two churches, Mr. Swancourt had undertaken the whole of the evening service, and Knight read the lessons for him. The sun streamed across from the dilapidated west window, and lighted all the assembled worshippers with a golden glow, Knight as he read being illuminated by the same mellow lustre. Elfride at the organ regarded him with a throbbing sadness of mood which was fed by a sense of being far removed from his sphere. As he went deliberately through the chapter appointed — a portion of the history of Elijah — and ascended that magnificent climax of the wind, the earthquake, the fire, and the still small voice, his deep tones echoed past with such apparent disregard of her existence, that his presence inspired her with a forlorn sense of unapproachableness, which his absence would hardly have been able to cause.

At the same time, turning her face for a moment to catch the glory of the dying sun as it fell on his form, her eyes were arrested by the shape and aspect of a woman in the west gallery. It was the bleak barren countenance of the widow Jethway, whom Elfride had not seen much of since the morning of her return with Stephen Smith. Possessing the smallest of competencies, this unhappy woman appeared to spend her life in journeyings between Endelstow Churchyard and that of a village near Southampton, where her father and mother were laid.

She had not attended the service here for a considerable time, and she now seemed to have a reason for her choice of seat. From the gallery window the tomb of her son was plainly visible — standing as the nearest object in a prospect which was closed outwardly by the changeless horizon of the sea.

The streaming rays, too, flooded her face, now bent towards Elfride with a hard and bitter expression that the solemnity of the place raised to a tragic dignity it did not intrinsically possess. The girl resumed her normal attitude with an added disquiet.

Elfride's emotion was cumulative, and after a while would assert itself on a sudden. A slight touch was enough to set it free — a poem, a sunset, a cunningly contrived chord of music, a vague imagining, being the usual accidents of its exhibition. The longing for Knight's respect, which was leading up to an incipient yearning for his love, made the present conjuncture a sufficient one. Whilst kneeling down previous to leaving, when the sunny streaks had gone upward to the roof, and the lower part of the church was in soft shadow, she could not help thinking of Coleridge's morbid poem 'The Three Graves,' and shuddering as she wondered if Mrs. Jethway were cursing her, she wept as if her heart would break.

They came out of church just as the sun went down, leaving the landscape like a platform from which an eloquent speaker has retired, and nothing remains for the audience to do but to rise and go home. Mr. and Mrs. Swancourt went off in the carriage, Knight and Elfride preferring to walk, as the skilful old matchmaker had imagined. They descended the hill together.

'I liked your reading, Mr. Knight,' Elfride presently found herself saying. 'You read better than papa.'

'I will praise anybody that will praise me. You played excellently, Miss Swancourt, and very correctly.'

'Correctly — yes.'

'It must be a great pleasure to you to take an active part in the service.'

'I want to be able to play with more feeling. But I have not a good selection of music, sacred or secular. I wish I had a nice little music-library — well chosen, and that the only new pieces sent me were those of genuine merit.'

'I am glad to hear such a wish from you. It is extraordinary how many women have no honest love of music as an end and not as a means, even leaving out those who have nothing in them. They mostly like it for its accessories. I have never met a woman who loves music as do ten or a dozen men I know.'

'How would you draw the line between women with something and women with nothing in them?'

'Well,' said Knight, reflecting a moment, 'I mean by nothing in them those who don't care about anything solid. This is an instance: I knew a man who had a young friend in whom he was much interested; in fact, they were going to be married. She was seemingly poetical, and he offered her a choice of two editions of the British poets, which she pretended to want badly. He said, "Which of them would you like best for me to send?" She said, "A pair of the prettiest earrings in Bond Street, if you don't mind, would be nicer than either." Now I call her a girl with not much in her but vanity; and so do you, I daresay.'

'Oh yes,' replied Elfride with an effort.

Happening to catch a glimpse of her face as she was speaking, and noticing that her attempt at heartiness was a miserable failure, he appeared to have misgivings.

‘You, Miss Swancourt, would not, under such circumstances, have preferred the nicknacks?’

‘No, I don’t think I should, indeed,’ she stammered.

‘I’ll put it to you,’ said the inflexible Knight. ‘Which will you have of these two things of about equal value — the well-chosen little library of the best music you spoke of — bound in morocco, walnut case, lock and key — or a pair of the very prettiest earrings in Bond Street windows?’

‘Of course the music,’ Elfride replied with forced earnestness.

‘You are quite certain?’ he said emphatically.

‘Quite,’ she faltered; ‘if I could for certain buy the earrings afterwards.’

Knight, somewhat blamably, keenly enjoyed sparring with the palpitating mobile creature, whose excitable nature made any such thing a species of cruelty.

He looked at her rather oddly, and said, ‘Fie!’

‘Forgive me,’ she said, laughing a little, a little frightened, and blushing very deeply.

‘Ah, Miss Elfie, why didn’t you say at first, as any firm woman would have said, I am as bad as she, and shall choose the same?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Elfride wofully, and with a distressful smile.

‘I thought you were exceptionally musical?’

‘So I am, I think. But the test is so severe — quite painful.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Music doesn’t do any real good, or rather — — ’

‘That IS a thing to say, Miss Swancourt! Why, what — — ’

‘You don’t understand! you don’t understand!’

‘Why, what conceivable use is there in jimcrack jewellery?’

‘No, no, no, no!’ she cried petulantly; ‘I didn’t mean what you think. I like the music best, only I like — — ’

‘Earrings better — own it!’ he said in a teasing tone. ‘Well, I think I should have had the moral courage to own it at once, without pretending to an elevation I could not reach.’

Like the French soldiery, Elfride was not brave when on the defensive. So it was almost with tears in her eyes that she answered desperately:

‘My meaning is, that I like earrings best just now, because I lost one of my prettiest pair last year, and papa said he would not buy any more, or allow me to myself, because I was careless; and now I wish I had some like them — that’s what my meaning is — indeed it is, Mr. Knight.’

‘I am afraid I have been very harsh and rude,’ said Knight, with a look of regret at seeing how disturbed she was. ‘But seriously, if women only knew how they ruin their good looks by such appurtenances, I am sure they would never want them.’

‘They were lovely, and became me so!’

‘Not if they were like the ordinary hideous things women stuff their ears with nowadays — like the governor of a steam-engine, or a pair of scales, or gold gibbets and chains, and artists’ palettes, and compensation pendulums, and Heaven knows what besides.’

‘No; they were not one of those things. So pretty — like this,’ she said with eager animation. And she drew with the point of her parasol an enlarged view of one of the lamented darlings, to a scale that would have suited a giantess half-a-mile high.

‘Yes, very pretty — very,’ said Knight dryly. ‘How did you come to lose such a precious pair of articles?’

‘I only lost one — nobody ever loses both at the same time.’

She made this remark with embarrassment, and a nervous movement of the fingers. Seeing that the loss occurred whilst Stephen Smith was attempting to kiss her for the first time on the cliff, her confusion was hardly to be wondered at. The question had been awkward, and received no direct answer.

Knight seemed not to notice her manner.

‘Oh, nobody ever loses both — I see. And certainly the fact that it was a case of loss takes away all odour of vanity from your choice.’

‘As I never know whether you are in earnest, I don’t now,’ she said, looking up inquiringly at the hairy face of the oracle. And coming gallantly to her own rescue, ‘If I really seem vain, it is that I am only vain in my ways — not in my heart. The worst women are those vain in their hearts, and not in their ways.’

‘An adroit distinction. Well, they are certainly the more objectionable of the two,’ said Knight.

‘Is vanity a mortal or a venial sin? You know what life is: tell me.’

‘I am very far from knowing what life is. A just conception of life is too large a thing to grasp during the short interval of passing through it.’

‘Will the fact of a woman being fond of jewellery be likely to make her life, in its higher sense, a failure?’

‘Nobody’s life is altogether a failure.’

‘Well, you know what I mean, even though my words are badly selected and commonplace,’ she said impatiently. ‘Because I utter commonplace words, you must not suppose I think only commonplace thoughts. My poor stock of words are like a limited number of rough moulds I have to cast all my materials in, good and bad; and the novelty or delicacy of the substance is often lost in the coarse triteness of the form.’

‘Very well; I’ll believe that ingenious representation. As to the subject in hand — lives which are failures — you need not trouble yourself. Anybody’s life may be just as romantic and strange and interesting if he or she fails as if he or she succeed. All the difference is, that the last chapter is wanting in the story. If a man of power tries to do a great deed, and just falls short of it by an accident not his fault, up to that time his history had as much in it as that of a great man who has done his great deed. It is whimsical of the world to hold that particulars of how a lad went to school and so

on should be as an interesting romance or as nothing to them, precisely in proportion to his after renown.'

They were walking between the sunset and the moonrise. With the dropping of the sun a nearly full moon had begun to raise itself. Their shadows, as cast by the western glare, showed signs of becoming obliterated in the interest of a rival pair in the opposite direction which the moon was bringing to distinctness.

'I consider my life to some extent a failure,' said Knight again after a pause, during which he had noticed the antagonistic shadows.

'You! How?'

'I don't precisely know. But in some way I have missed the mark.'

'Really? To have done it is not much to be sad about, but to feel that you have done it must be a cause of sorrow. Am I right?'

'Partly, though not quite. For a sensation of being profoundly experienced serves as a sort of consolation to people who are conscious of having taken wrong turnings. Contradictory as it seems, there is nothing truer than that people who have always gone right don't know half as much about the nature and ways of going right as those do who have gone wrong. However, it is not desirable for me to chill your summer-time by going into this.'

'You have not told me even now if I am really vain.'

'If I say Yes, I shall offend you; if I say No, you'll think I don't mean it,' he replied, looking curiously into her face.

'Ah, well,' she replied, with a little breath of distress, "'That which is exceeding deep, who will find it out?" I suppose I must take you as I do the Bible — find out and understand all I can; and on the strength of that, swallow the rest in a lump, by simple faith. Think me vain, if you will. Worldly greatness requires so much littleness to grow up in, that an infirmity more or less is not a matter for regret.'

'As regards women, I can't say,' answered Knight carelessly; 'but it is without doubt a misfortune for a man who has a living to get, to be born of a truly noble nature. A high soul will bring a man to the workhouse; so you may be right in sticking up for vanity.'

'No, no, I don't do that,' she said regretfully.

Mr. Knight, when you are gone, will you send me something you have written? I think I should like to see whether you write as you have lately spoken, or in your better mood. Which is your true self — the cynic you have been this evening, or the nice philosopher you were up to to-night?'

'Ah, which? You know as well as I.'

Their conversation detained them on the lawn and in the portico till the stars blinked out. Elfride flung back her head, and said idly —

'There's a bright star exactly over me.'

'Each bright star is overhead somewhere.'

'Is it? Oh yes, of course. Where is that one?' and she pointed with her finger.

'That is poised like a white hawk over one of the Cape Verde Islands.'

‘And that?’

‘Looking down upon the source of the Nile.’

‘And that lonely quiet-looking one?’

‘He watches the North Pole, and has no less than the whole equator for his horizon. And that idle one low down upon the ground, that we have almost rolled away from, is in India — over the head of a young friend of mine, who very possibly looks at the star in our zenith, as it hangs low upon his horizon, and thinks of it as marking where his true love dwells.’

Elfride glanced at Knight with misgiving. Did he mean her? She could not see his features; but his attitude seemed to show unconsciousness.

‘The star is over MY head,’ she said with hesitation.

‘Or anybody else’s in England.’

‘Oh yes, I see:’ she breathed her relief.

‘His parents, I believe, are natives of this county. I don’t know them, though I have been in correspondence with him for many years till lately. Fortunately or unfortunately for him he fell in love, and then went to Bombay. Since that time I have heard very little of him.’

Knight went no further in his volunteered statement, and though Elfride at one moment was inclined to profit by the lessons in honesty he had just been giving her, the flesh was weak, and the intention dispersed into silence. There seemed a reproach in Knight’s blind words, and yet she was not able to clearly define any disloyalty that she had been guilty of.

CHAPTER XX

‘A distant dearness in the hill.’

Knight turned his back upon the parish of Endelstow, and crossed over to Cork.

One day of absence superimposed itself on another, and proportionately weighted his heart. He pushed on to the Lakes of Killarney, rambled amid their luxuriant woods, surveyed the infinite variety of island, hill, and dale there to be found, listened to the marvellous echoes of that romantic spot; but altogether missed the glory and the dream he formerly found in such favoured regions.

Whilst in the company of Elfride, her girlish presence had not perceptibly affected him to any depth. He had not been conscious that her entry into his sphere had added anything to himself; but now that she was taken away he was very conscious of a great deal being abstracted. The superfluity had become a necessity, and Knight was in love.

Stephen fell in love with Elfride by looking at her: Knight by ceasing to do so. When or how the spirit entered into him he knew not: certain he was that when on the point of leaving Endelstow he had felt none of that exquisite nicety of poignant sadness natural to such severances, seeing how delightful a subject of contemplation Elfride had been ever since. Had he begun to love her when she met his eye after her mishap on

the tower? He had simply thought her weak. Had he grown to love her whilst standing on the lawn brightened all over by the evening sun? He had thought her complexion good: no more. Was it her conversation that had sown the seed? He had thought her words ingenious, and very creditable to a young woman, but not noteworthy. Had the chess-playing anything to do with it? Certainly not: he had thought her at that time a rather conceited child.

Knight's experience was a complete disproof of the assumption that love always comes by glances of the eye and sympathetic touches of the fingers: that, like flame, it makes itself palpable at the moment of generation. Not till they were parted, and she had become sublimated in his memory, could he be said to have even attentively regarded her.

Thus, having passively gathered up images of her which his mind did not act upon till the cause of them was no longer before him, he appeared to himself to have fallen in love with her soul, which had temporarily assumed its disembodiment to accompany him on his way.

She began to rule him so imperiously now that, accustomed to analysis, he almost trembled at the possible result of the introduction of this new force among the nicely adjusted ones of his ordinary life. He became restless: then he forgot all collateral subjects in the pleasure of thinking about her.

Yet it must be said that Knight loved philosophically rather than with romance.

He thought of her manner towards him. Simplicity verges on coquetry. Was she flirting? he said to himself. No forcible translation of favour into suspicion was able to uphold such a theory. The performance had been too well done to be anything but real. It had the defects without which nothing is genuine. No actress of twenty years' standing, no bald-necked lady whose earliest season 'out' was lost in the discreet mist of evasive talk, could have played before him the part of ingenuous girl as Elfride lived it. She had the little artful ways which partly make up ingenuousness.

There are bachelors by nature and bachelors by circumstance: spinsters there doubtless are also of both kinds, though some think only those of the latter. However, Knight had been looked upon as a bachelor by nature. What was he coming to? It was very odd to himself to look at his theories on the subject of love, and reading them now by the full light of a new experience, to see how much more his sentences meant than he had felt them to mean when they were written. People often discover the real force of a trite old maxim only when it is thrust upon them by a chance adventure; but Knight had never before known the case of a man who learnt the full compass of his own epigrams by such means.

He was intensely satisfied with one aspect of the affair. Inbred in him was an invincible objection to be any but the first comer in a woman's heart. He had discovered within himself the condition that if ever he did make up his mind to marry, it must be on the certainty that no cropping out of inconvenient old letters, no bow and blush to a mysterious stranger casually met, should be a possible source of discomposure. Knight's sentiments were only the ordinary ones of a man of his age who loves gen-

uinely, perhaps exaggerated a little by his pursuits. When men first love as lads, it is with the very centre of their hearts, nothing else being concerned in the operation. With added years, more of the faculties attempt a partnership in the passion, till at Knight's age the understanding is fain to have a hand in it. It may as well be left out. A man in love setting up his brains as a gauge of his position is as one determining a ship's longitude from a light at the mast-head.

Knight argued from Elfride's unwontedness of manner, which was matter of fact, to an unwontedness in love, which was matter of inference only. *Incredules les plus credules.* 'Elfride,' he said, 'had hardly looked upon a man till she saw me.'

He had never forgotten his severity to her because she preferred ornament to edification, and had since excused her a hundred times by thinking how natural to womankind was a love of adornment, and how necessary became a mild infusion of personal vanity to complete the delicate and fascinating dye of the feminine mind. So at the end of the week's absence, which had brought him as far as Dublin, he resolved to curtail his tour, return to Endelstow, and commit himself by making a reality of the hypothetical offer of that Sunday evening.

Notwithstanding that he had concocted a great deal of paper theory on social amenities and modern manners generally, the special ounce of practice was wanting, and now for his life Knight could not recollect whether it was considered correct to give a young lady personal ornaments before a regular engagement to marry had been initiated. But the day before leaving Dublin he looked around anxiously for a high-class jewellery establishment, in which he purchased what he considered would suit her best.

It was with a most awkward and unwonted feeling that after entering and closing the door of his room he sat down, opened the morocco case, and held up each of the fragile bits of gold-work before his eyes. Many things had become old to the solitary man of letters, but these were new, and he handled like a child an outcome of civilization which had never before been touched by his fingers. A sudden fastidious decision that the pattern chosen would not suit her after all caused him to rise in a flurry and tear down the street to change them for others. After a great deal of trouble in reselecting, during which his mind became so bewildered that the critical faculty on objects of art seemed to have vacated his person altogether, Knight carried off another pair of ear-rings. These remained in his possession till the afternoon, when, after contemplating them fifty times with a growing misgiving that the last choice was worse than the first, he felt that no sleep would visit his pillow till he had improved upon his previous purchases yet again. In a perfect heat of vexation with himself for such tergiversation, he went anew to the shop-door, was absolutely ashamed to enter and give further trouble, went to another shop, bought a pair at an enormously increased price, because they seemed the very thing, asked the goldsmiths if they would take the other pair in exchange, was told that they could not exchange articles bought of another maker, paid down the money, and went off with the two pairs in his possession, wondering what on earth to do with the superfluous pair. He almost wished he could lose them, or that somebody would steal them, and was burdened with an interposing sense that, as a capable man,

with true ideas of economy, he must necessarily sell them somewhere, which he did at last for a mere song. Mingled with a blank feeling of a whole day being lost to him in running about the city on this new and extraordinary class of errand, and of several pounds being lost through his bungling, was a slight sense of satisfaction that he had emerged for ever from his antediluvian ignorance on the subject of ladies' jewellery, as well as secured a truly artistic production at last. During the remainder of that day he scanned the ornaments of every lady he met with the profoundly experienced eye of an appraiser.

Next morning Knight was again crossing St. George's Channel — not returning to London by the Holyhead route as he had originally intended, but towards Bristol — availing himself of Mr. and Mrs. Swancourt's invitation to revisit them on his homeward journey.

We flit forward to Elfride.

Woman's ruling passion — to fascinate and influence those more powerful than she — though operant in Elfride, was decidedly purposeless. She had wanted her friend Knight's good opinion from the first: how much more than that elementary ingredient of friendship she now desired, her fears would hardly allow her to think. In originally wishing to please the highest class of man she had ever intimately known, there was no disloyalty to Stephen Smith. She could not — and few women can — realise the possible vastness of an issue which has only an insignificant begetting.

Her letters from Stephen were necessarily few, and her sense of fidelity clung to the last she had received as a wrecked mariner clings to flotsam. The young girl persuaded herself that she was glad Stephen had such a right to her hand as he had acquired (in her eyes) by the elopement. She beguiled herself by saying, 'Perhaps if I had not so committed myself I might fall in love with Mr. Knight.'

All this made the week of Knight's absence very gloomy and distasteful to her. She retained Stephen in her prayers, and his old letters were re-read — as a medicine in reality, though she deceived herself into the belief that it was as a pleasure.

These letters had grown more and more hopeful. He told her that he finished his work every day with a pleasant consciousness of having removed one more stone from the barrier which divided them. Then he drew images of what a fine figure they two would cut some day. People would turn their heads and say, 'What a prize he has won!' She was not to be sad about that wild runaway attempt of theirs (Elfride had repeatedly said that it grieved her). Whatever any other person who knew of it might think, he knew well enough the modesty of her nature. The only reproach was a gentle one for not having written quite so devotedly during her visit to London. Her letter had seemed to have a liveliness derived from other thoughts than thoughts of him.

Knight's intention of an early return to Endelstow having originally been faint, his promise to do so had been fainter. He was a man who kept his words well to the rear of his possible actions. The vicar was rather surprised to see him again so soon: Mrs. Swancourt was not. Knight found, on meeting them all, after his arrival had been

announced, that they had formed an intention to go to St. Leonards for a few days at the end of the month.

No satisfactory conjuncture offered itself on this first evening of his return for presenting Elfride with what he had been at such pains to procure. He was fastidious in his reading of opportunities for such an intended act. The next morning chancing to break fine after a week of cloudy weather, it was proposed and decided that they should all drive to Barwith Strand, a local lion which neither Mrs. Swancourt nor Knight had seen. Knight scented romantic occasions from afar, and foresaw that such a one might be expected before the coming night.

The journey was along a road by neutral green hills, upon which hedgerows lay trailing like ropes on a quay. Gaps in these uplands revealed the blue sea, flecked with a few dashes of white and a solitary white sail, the whole brimming up to a keen horizon which lay like a line ruled from hillside to hillside. Then they rolled down a pass, the chocolate-toned rocks forming a wall on both sides, from one of which fell a heavy jagged shade over half the roadway. A spout of fresh water burst from an occasional crevice, and pattering down upon broad green leaves, ran along as a rivulet at the bottom. Unkempt locks of heather overhung the brow of each steep, whence at divers points a bramble swung forth into mid-air, snatching at their head-dresses like a claw.

They mounted the last crest, and the bay which was to be the end of their pilgrimage burst upon them. The ocean blueness deepened its colour as it stretched to the foot of the crags, where it terminated in a fringe of white — silent at this distance, though moving and heaving like a counterpane upon a restless sleeper. The shadowed hollows of the purple and brown rocks would have been called blue had not that tint been so entirely appropriated by the water beside them.

The carriage was put up at a little cottage with a shed attached, and an ostler and the coachman carried the hamper of provisions down to the shore.

Knight found his opportunity. 'I did not forget your wish,' he began, when they were apart from their friends.

Elfride looked as if she did not understand.

'And I have brought you these,' he continued, awkwardly pulling out the case, and opening it while holding it towards her.

'O Mr. Knight!' said Elfride confusedly, and turning to a lively red; 'I didn't know you had any intention or meaning in what you said. I thought it a mere supposition. I don't want them.'

A thought which had flashed into her mind gave the reply a greater decisiveness than it might otherwise have possessed. To-morrow was the day for Stephen's letter.

'But will you not accept them?' Knight returned, feeling less her master than heretofore.

'I would rather not. They are beautiful — more beautiful than any I have ever seen,' she answered earnestly, looking half-wishfully at the temptation, as Eve may

have looked at the apple. 'But I don't want to have them, if you will kindly forgive me, Mr. Knight.'

'No kindness at all,' said Mr. Knight, brought to a full stop at this unexpected turn of events.

A silence followed. Knight held the open case, looking rather wofully at the glittering forms he had forsaken his orbit to procure; turning it about and holding it up as if, feeling his gift to be slighted by her, he were endeavouring to admire it very much himself.

'Shut them up, and don't let me see them any longer — do!' she said laughingly, and with a quaint mixture of reluctance and entreaty.

'Why, Elfie?'

'Not Elfie to you, Mr. Knight. Oh, because I shall want them. There, I am silly, I know, to say that! But I have a reason for not taking them — now.' She kept in the last word for a moment, intending to imply that her refusal was finite, but somehow the word slipped out, and undid all the rest.

'You will take them some day?'

'I don't want to.'

'Why don't you want to, Elfride Swancourt?'

'Because I don't. I don't like to take them.'

'I have read a fact of distressing significance in that,' said Knight. 'Since you like them, your dislike to having them must be towards me?'

'No, it isn't.'

'What, then? Do you like me?'

Elfride deepened in tint, and looked into the distance with features shaped to an expression of the nicest criticism as regarded her answer.

'I like you pretty well,' she at length murmured mildly.

'Not very much?'

'You are so sharp with me, and say hard things, and so how can I?' she replied evasively.

'You think me a fogley, I suppose?'

'No, I don't — I mean I do — I don't know what I think you, I mean. Let us go to papa,' responded Elfride, with somewhat of a flurried delivery.

'Well, I'll tell you my object in getting the present,' said Knight, with a composure intended to remove from her mind any possible impression of his being what he was — her lover. 'You see it was the very least I could do in common civility.'

Elfride felt rather blank at this lucid statement.

Knight continued, putting away the case: 'I felt as anybody naturally would have, you know, that my words on your choice the other day were invidious and unfair, and thought an apology should take a practical shape.'

'Oh yes.'

Elfride was sorry — she could not tell why — that he gave such a legitimate reason. It was a disappointment that he had all the time a cool motive, which might be stated

to anybody without raising a smile. Had she known they were offered in that spirit, she would certainly have accepted the seductive gift. And the tantalising feature was that perhaps he suspected her to imagine them offered as a lover's token, which was mortifying enough if they were not.

Mrs. Swancourt came now to where they were sitting, to select a flat boulder for spreading their table-cloth upon, and, amid the discussion on that subject, the matter pending between Knight and Elfride was shelved for a while. He read her refusal so certainly as the bashfulness of a girl in a novel position, that, upon the whole, he could tolerate such a beginning. Could Knight have been told that it was a sense of fidelity struggling against new love, whilst no less assuring as to his ultimate victory, it might have entirely abstracted the wish to secure it.

At the same time a slight constraint of manner was visible between them for the remainder of the afternoon. The tide turned, and they were obliged to ascend to higher ground. The day glided on to its end with the usual quiet dreamy passivity of such occasions — when every deed done and thing thought is in endeavouring to avoid doing and thinking more. Looking idly over the verge of a crag, they beheld their stone dining-table gradually being splashed upon and their crumbs and fragments all washed away by the incoming sea. The vicar drew a moral lesson from the scene; Knight replied in the same satisfied strain. And then the waves rolled in furiously — the neutral green-and-blue tongues of water slid up the slopes, and were metamorphosed into foam by a careless blow, falling back white and faint, and leaving trailing followers behind.

The passing of a heavy shower was the next scene — driving them to shelter in a shallow cave — after which the horses were put in, and they started to return homeward. By the time they reached the higher levels the sky had again cleared, and the sunset rays glanced directly upon the wet uphill road they had climbed. The ruts formed by their carriage-wheels on the ascent — a pair of Liliputian canals — were as shining bars of gold, tapering to nothing in the distance. Upon this also they turned their backs, and night spread over the sea.

The evening was chilly, and there was no moon. Knight sat close to Elfride, and, when the darkness rendered the position of a person a matter of uncertainty, particularly close. Elfride edged away.

‘I hope you allow me my place ungrudgingly?’ he whispered.

‘Oh yes; ‘tis the least I can do in common civility,’ she said, accenting the words so that he might recognize them as his own returned.

Both of them felt delicately balanced between two possibilities. Thus they reached home.

To Knight this mild experience was delightful. It was to him a gentle innocent time — a time which, though there may not be much in it, seldom repeats itself in a man's life, and has a peculiar dearness when glanced at retrospectively. He is not inconveniently deep in love, and is lulled by a peaceful sense of being able to enjoy the most trivial thing with a childlike enjoyment. The movement of a wave, the colour of a stone, anything, was enough for Knight's drowsy thoughts of that day to precipitate

themselves upon. Even the sermonizing platitudes the vicar had delivered himself of — chiefly because something seemed to be professionally required of him in the presence of a man of Knight's proclivities — were swallowed whole. The presence of Elfride led him not merely to tolerate that kind of talk from the necessities of ordinary courtesy; but he listened to it — took in the ideas with an enjoyable make-believe that they were proper and necessary, and indulged in a conservative feeling that the face of things was complete.

Entering her room that evening Elfride found a packet for herself on the dressing-table. How it came there she did not know. She tremblingly undid the folds of white paper that covered it. Yes; it was the treasure of a morocco case, containing those treasures of ornament she had refused in the daytime.

Elfride dressed herself in them for a moment, looked at herself in the glass, blushed red, and put them away. They filled her dreams all that night. Never had she seen anything so lovely, and never was it more clear that as an honest woman she was in duty bound to refuse them. Why it was not equally clear to her that duty required more vigorous co-ordinate conduct as well, let those who dissect her say.

The next morning glared in like a spectre upon her. It was Stephen's letter-day, and she was bound to meet the postman — to stealthily do a deed she had never liked, to secure an end she now had ceased to desire.

But she went.

There were two letters.

One was from the bank at St. Launce's, in which she had a small private deposit — probably something about interest. She put that in her pocket for a moment, and going indoors and upstairs to be safer from observation, tremblingly opened Stephen's.

What was this he said to her?

She was to go to the St. Launce's Bank and take a sum of money which they had received private advices to pay her.

The sum was two hundred pounds.

There was no check, order, or anything of the nature of guarantee. In fact the information amounted to this: the money was now in the St. Launce's Bank, standing in her name.

She instantly opened the other letter. It contained a deposit-note from the bank for the sum of two hundred pounds which had that day been added to her account. Stephen's information, then, was correct, and the transfer made.

'I have saved this in one year,' Stephen's letter went on to say, 'and what so proper as well as pleasant for me to do as to hand it over to you to keep for your use? I have plenty for myself, independently of this. Should you not be disposed to let it lie idle in the bank, get your father to invest it in your name on good security. It is a little present to you from your more than betrothed. He will, I think, Elfride, feel now that my pretensions to your hand are anything but the dream of a silly boy not worth rational consideration.'

With a natural delicacy, Elfride, in mentioning her father's marriage, had refrained from all allusion to the pecuniary resources of the lady.

Leaving this matter-of-fact subject, he went on, somewhat after his boyish manner:

'Do you remember, darling, that first morning of my arrival at your house, when your father read at prayers the miracle of healing the sick of the palsy — where he is told to take up his bed and walk? I do, and I can now so well realise the force of that passage. The smallest piece of mat is the bed of the Oriental, and yesterday I saw a native perform the very action, which reminded me to mention it. But you are better read than I, and perhaps you knew all this long ago...One day I bought some small native idols to send home to you as curiosities, but afterwards finding they had been cast in England, made to look old, and shipped over, I threw them away in disgust.

'Speaking of this reminds me that we are obliged to import all our house-building ironwork from England. Never was such foresight required to be exercised in building houses as here. Before we begin, we have to order every column, lock, hinge, and screw that will be required. We cannot go into the next street, as in London, and get them cast at a minute's notice. Mr. L. says somebody will have to go to England very soon and superintend the selection of a large order of this kind. I only wish I may be the man.'

There before her lay the deposit-receipt for the two hundred pounds, and beside it the elegant present of Knight. Elfride grew cold — then her cheeks felt heated by beating blood. If by destroying the piece of paper the whole transaction could have been withdrawn from her experience, she would willingly have sacrificed the money it represented. She did not know what to do in either case. She almost feared to let the two articles lie in juxtaposition: so antagonistic were the interests they represented that a miraculous repulsion of one by the other was almost to be expected.

That day she was seen little of. By the evening she had come to a resolution, and acted upon it. The packet was sealed up — with a tear of regret as she closed the case upon the pretty forms it contained — directed, and placed upon the writing-table in Knight's room. And a letter was written to Stephen, stating that as yet she hardly understood her position with regard to the money sent; but declaring that she was ready to fulfil her promise to marry him. After this letter had been written she delayed posting it — although never ceasing to feel strenuously that the deed must be done.

Several days passed. There was another Indian letter for Elfride. Coming unexpectedly, her father saw it, but made no remark — why, she could not tell. The news this time was absolutely overwhelming. Stephen, as he had wished, had been actually chosen as the most fitting to execute the iron-work commission he had alluded to as impending. This duty completed he would have three months' leave. His letter continued that he should follow it in a week, and should take the opportunity to plainly ask her father to permit the engagement. Then came a page expressive of his delight and hers at the reunion; and finally, the information that he would write to the shipping

agents, asking them to telegraph and tell her when the ship bringing him home should be in sight — knowing how acceptable such information would be.

Elfride lived and moved now as in a dream. Knight had at first become almost angry at her persistent refusal of his offering — and no less with the manner than the fact of it. But he saw that she began to look worn and ill — and his vexation lessened to simple perplexity.

He ceased now to remain in the house for long hours together as before, but made it a mere centre for antiquarian and geological excursions in the neighbourhood. Throw up his cards and go away he fain would have done, but could not. And, thus, availing himself of the privileges of a relative, he went in and out the premises as fancy led him — but still lingered on.

‘I don’t wish to stay here another day if my presence is distasteful,’ he said one afternoon. ‘At first you used to imply that I was severe with you; and when I am kind you treat me unfairly.’

‘No, no. Don’t say so.’

The origin of their acquaintanceship had been such as to render their manner towards each other peculiar and uncommon. It was of a kind to cause them to speak out their minds on any feelings of objection and difference: to be reticent on gentler matters.

‘I have a good mind to go away and never trouble you again,’ continued Knight.

She said nothing, but the eloquent expression of her eyes and wan face was enough to reproach him for harshness.

‘Do you like me to be here, then?’ inquired Knight gently.

‘Yes,’ she said. Fidelity to the old love and truth to the new were ranged on opposite sides, and truth virtuelessly prevailed.

‘Then I’ll stay a little longer,’ said Knight.

‘Don’t be vexed if I keep by myself a good deal, will you? Perhaps something may happen, and I may tell you something.’

‘Mere coyness,’ said Knight to himself; and went away with a lighter heart. The trick of reading truly the enigmatical forces at work in women at given times, which with some men is an unerring instinct, is peculiar to minds less direct and honest than Knight’s.

The next evening, about five o’clock, before Knight had returned from a pilgrimage along the shore, a man walked up to the house. He was a messenger from Camelton, a town a few miles off, to which place the railway had been advanced during the summer.

‘A telegram for Miss Swancourt, and three and sixpence to pay for the special messenger.’ Miss Swancourt sent out the money, signed the paper, and opened her letter with a trembling hand. She read:

‘Johnson, Liverpool, to Miss Swancourt, Endelstow, near Castle Boterel.

‘Amaryllis telegraphed off Holyhead, four o’clock. Expect will dock and land passengers at Canning’s Basin ten o’clock to-morrow morning.’

Her father called her into the study.

‘Elfride, who sent you that message?’ he asked suspiciously.
‘Johnson.’ ‘Who is Johnson, for Heaven’s sake?’
‘I don’t know.’
‘The deuce you don’t! Who is to know, then?’
‘I have never heard of him till now.’
‘That’s a singular story, isn’t it.’
‘I don’t know.’
‘Come, come, miss! What was the telegram?’
‘Do you really wish to know, papa?’
‘Well, I do.’
‘Remember, I am a full-grown woman now.’
‘Well, what then?’
‘Being a woman, and not a child, I may, I think, have a secret or two.’
‘You will, it seems.’
‘Women have, as a rule.’
‘But don’t keep them. So speak out.’
‘If you will not press me now, I give my word to tell you the meaning of all this before the week is past.’
‘On your honour?’
‘On my honour.’
‘Very well. I have had a certain suspicion, you know; and I shall be glad to find it false. I don’t like your manner lately.’
‘At the end of the week, I said, papa.’

Her father did not reply, and Elfride left the room.

She began to look out for the postman again. Three mornings later he brought an inland letter from Stephen. It contained very little matter, having been written in haste; but the meaning was bulky enough. Stephen said that, having executed a commission in Liverpool, he should arrive at his father’s house, East Endelstow, at five or six o’clock that same evening; that he would after dusk walk on to the next village, and meet her, if she would, in the church porch, as in the old time. He proposed this plan because he thought it unadvisable to call formally at her house so late in the evening; yet he could not sleep without having seen her. The minutes would seem hours till he clasped her in his arms.

Elfride was still steadfast in her opinion that honour compelled her to meet him. Probably the very longing to avoid him lent additional weight to the conviction; for she was markedly one of those who sigh for the unattainable — to whom, superlatively, a hope is pleasing because not a possession. And she knew it so well that her intellect was inclined to exaggerate this defect in herself.

So during the day she looked her duty steadfastly in the face; read Wordsworth’s astringent yet depressing ode to that Deity; committed herself to her guidance; and still felt the weight of chance desires.

But she began to take a melancholy pleasure in contemplating the sacrifice of herself to the man whom a maidenly sense of propriety compelled her to regard as her only possible husband. She would meet him, and do all that lay in her power to marry him. To guard against a relapse, a note was at once despatched to his father's cottage for Stephen on his arrival, fixing an hour for the interview.

CHAPTER XXI

'On thy cold grey stones, O sea!'

Stephen had said that he should come by way of Bristol, and thence by a steamer to Castle Boterel, in order to avoid the long journey over the hills from St. Launce's. He did not know of the extension of the railway to Camelton.

During the afternoon a thought occurred to Elfride, that from any cliff along the shore it would be possible to see the steamer some hours before its arrival.

She had accumulated religious force enough to do an act of supererogation. The act was this — to go to some point of land and watch for the ship that brought her future husband home.

It was a cloudy afternoon. Elfride was often diverted from a purpose by a dull sky; and though she used to persuade herself that the weather was as fine as possible on the other side of the clouds, she could not bring about any practical result from this fancy. Now, her mood was such that the humid sky harmonized with it.

Having ascended and passed over a hill behind the house, Elfride came to a small stream. She used it as a guide to the coast. It was smaller than that in her own valley, and flowed altogether at a higher level. Bushes lined the slopes of its shallow trough; but at the bottom, where the water ran, was a soft green carpet, in a strip two or three yards wide.

In winter, the water flowed over the grass; in summer, as now, it trickled along a channel in the midst.

Elfride had a sensation of eyes regarding her from somewhere. She turned, and there was Mr. Knight. He had dropped into the valley from the side of the hill. She felt a thrill of pleasure, and rebelliously allowed it to exist.

'What utter loneliness to find you in!'

'I am going to the shore by tracking the stream. I believe it empties itself not far off, in a silver thread of water, over a cascade of great height.'

'Why do you load yourself with that heavy telescope?'

'To look over the sea with it,' she said faintly.

'I'll carry it for you to your journey's end.' And he took the glass from her unresisting hands. 'It cannot be half a mile further. See, there is the water.' He pointed to a short fragment of level muddy-gray colour, cutting against the sky.

Elfride had already scanned the small surface of ocean visible, and had seen no ship.

They walked along in company, sometimes with the brook between them — for it was no wider than a man's stride — sometimes close together. The green carpet grew swampy, and they kept higher up.

One of the two ridges between which they walked dwindled lower and became insignificant. That on the right hand rose with their advance, and terminated in a clearly defined edge against the light, as if it were abruptly sawn off. A little further, and the bed of the rivulet ended in the same fashion.

They had come to a bank breast-high, and over it the valley was no longer to be seen. It was withdrawn cleanly and completely. In its place was sky and boundless atmosphere; and perpendicularly down beneath them — small and far off — lay the corrugated surface of the Atlantic.

The small stream here found its death. Running over the precipice it was dispersed in spray before it was half-way down, and falling like rain upon projecting ledges, made minute grassy meadows of them. At the bottom the water-drops soaked away amid the debris of the cliff. This was the inglorious end of the river.

'What are you looking for?' said Knight, following the direction of her eyes.

She was gazing hard at a black object — nearer to the shore than to the horizon — from the summit of which came a nebulous haze, stretching like gauze over the sea.

'The Puffin, a little summer steamboat — from Bristol to Castle Boterel,' she said. 'I think that is it — look. Will you give me the glass?'

Knight pulled open the old-fashioned but powerful telescope, and handed it to Elfride, who had looked on with heavy eyes.

'I can't keep it up now,' she said.

'Rest it on my shoulder.'

'It is too high.'

'Under my arm.'

'Too low. You may look instead,' she murmured weakly.

Knight raised the glass to his eye, and swept the sea till the Puffin entered its field.

'Yes, it is the Puffin — a tiny craft. I can see her figure-head distinctly — a bird with a beak as big as its head.'

'Can you see the deck?'

'Wait a minute; yes, pretty clearly. And I can see the black forms of the passengers against its white surface. One of them has taken something from another — a glass, I think — yes, it is — and he is levelling it in this direction. Depend upon it we are conspicuous objects against the sky to them. Now, it seems to rain upon them, and they put on overcoats and open umbrellas. They vanish and go below — all but that one who has borrowed the glass. He is a slim young fellow, and still watches us.'

Elfride grew pale, and shifted her little feet uneasily.

Knight lowered the glass.

'I think we had better return,' he said. 'That cloud which is raining on them may soon reach us. Why, you look ill. How is that?'

'Something in the air affects my face.'

‘Those fair cheeks are very fastidious, I fear,’ returned Knight tenderly. ‘This air would make those rosy that were never so before, one would think — eh, Nature’s spoilt child?’

Elfride’s colour returned again.

‘There is more to see behind us, after all,’ said Knight.

She turned her back upon the boat and Stephen Smith, and saw, towering still higher than themselves, the vertical face of the hill on the right, which did not project seaward so far as the bed of the valley, but formed the back of a small cove, and so was visible like a concave wall, bending round from their position towards the left.

The composition of the huge hill was revealed to its backbone and marrow here at its rent extremity. It consisted of a vast stratification of blackish-gray slate, unvaried in its whole height by a single change of shade.

It is with cliffs and mountains as with persons; they have what is called a presence, which is not necessarily proportionate to their actual bulk. A little cliff will impress you powerfully; a great one not at all. It depends, as with man, upon the countenance of the cliff.

‘I cannot bear to look at that cliff,’ said Elfride. ‘It has a horrid personality, and makes me shudder. We will go.’

‘Can you climb?’ said Knight. ‘If so, we will ascend by that path over the grim old fellow’s brow.’

‘Try me,’ said Elfride disdainfully. ‘I have ascended steeper slopes than that.’

From where they had been loitering, a grassy path wound along inside a bank, placed as a safeguard for unwary pedestrians, to the top of the precipice, and over it along the hill in an inland direction.

‘Take my arm, Miss Swancourt,’ said Knight.

‘I can get on better without it, thank you.’

When they were one quarter of the way up, Elfride stopped to take breath. Knight stretched out his hand.

She took it, and they ascended the remaining slope together. Reaching the very top, they sat down to rest by mutual consent.

‘Heavens, what an altitude!’ said Knight between his pants, and looking far over the sea. The cascade at the bottom of the slope appeared a mere span in height from where they were now.

Elfride was looking to the left. The steamboat was in full view again, and by reason of the vast surface of sea their higher position uncovered it seemed almost close to the shore.

‘Over that edge,’ said Knight, ‘where nothing but vacancy appears, is a moving compact mass. The wind strikes the face of the rock, runs up it, rises like a fountain to a height far above our heads, curls over us in an arch, and disperses behind us. In fact, an inverted cascade is there — as perfect as the Niagara Falls — but rising instead of falling, and air instead of water. Now look here.’

Knight threw a stone over the bank, aiming it as if to go onward over the cliff. Reaching the verge, it towered into the air like a bird, turned back, and alighted on the ground behind them. They themselves were in a dead calm.

‘A boat crosses Niagara immediately at the foot of the falls, where the water is quite still, the fallen mass curving under it. We are in precisely the same position with regard to our atmospheric cataract here. If you run back from the cliff fifty yards, you will be in a brisk wind. Now I daresay over the bank is a little backward current.’

Knight rose and leant over the bank. No sooner was his head above it than his hat appeared to be sucked from his head — slipping over his forehead in a seaward direction.

‘That’s the backward eddy, as I told you,’ he cried, and vanished over the little bank after his hat.

Elfride waited one minute; he did not return. She waited another, and there was no sign of him.

A few drops of rain fell, then a sudden shower.

She arose, and looked over the bank. On the other side were two or three yards of level ground — then a short steep preparatory slope — then the verge of the precipice.

On the slope was Knight, his hat on his head. He was on his hands and knees, trying to climb back to the level ground. The rain had wetted the shaly surface of the incline. A slight superficial wetting of the soil hereabout made it far more slippery to stand on than the same soil thoroughly drenched. The inner substance was still hard, and was lubricated by the moistened film.

‘I find a difficulty in getting back,’ said Knight.

Elfride’s heart fell like lead.

‘But you can get back?’ she wildly inquired.

Knight strove with all his might for two or three minutes, and the drops of perspiration began to bead his brow.

‘No, I am unable to do it,’ he answered.

Elfride, by a wrench of thought, forced away from her mind the sensation that Knight was in bodily danger. But attempt to help him she must. She ventured upon the treacherous incline, propped herself with the closed telescope, and gave him her hand before he saw her movements.

‘O Elfride! why did you?’ said he. ‘I am afraid you have only endangered yourself.’

And as if to prove his statement, in making an endeavour by her assistance they both slipped lower, and then he was again stayed. His foot was propped by a bracket of quartz rock, balanced on the verge of the precipice. Fixed by this, he steadied her, her head being about a foot below the beginning of the slope. Elfride had dropped the glass; it rolled to the edge and vanished over it into a nether sky.

‘Hold tightly to me,’ he said.

She flung her arms round his neck with such a firm grasp that whilst he remained it was impossible for her to fall.

‘Don’t be flurried,’ Knight continued. ‘So long as we stay above this block we are perfectly safe. Wait a moment whilst I consider what we had better do.’

He turned his eyes to the dizzy depths beneath them, and surveyed the position of affairs.

Two glances told him a tale with ghastly distinctness. It was that, unless they performed their feat of getting up the slope with the precision of machines, they were over the edge and whirling in mid-air.

For this purpose it was necessary that he should recover the breath and strength which his previous efforts had cost him. So he still waited, and looked in the face of the enemy.

The crest of this terrible natural facade passed among the neighbouring inhabitants as being seven hundred feet above the water it overhung. It had been proved by actual measurement to be not a foot less than six hundred and fifty.

That is to say, it is nearly three times the height of Flamborough, half as high again as the South Foreland, a hundred feet higher than Beachy Head — the loftiest promontory on the east or south side of this island — twice the height of St. Aldhelm’s, thrice as high as the Lizard, and just double the height of St. Bee’s. One sea-board point on the western coast is known to surpass it in altitude, but only by a few feet. This is Great Orme’s Head, in Caernarvonshire.

And it must be remembered that the cliff exhibits an intensifying feature which some of those are without — sheer perpendicularity from the half-tide level.

Yet this remarkable rampart forms no headland: it rather walls in an inlet — the promontory on each side being much lower. Thus, far from being salient, its horizontal section is concave. The sea, rolling direct from the shores of North America, has in fact eaten a chasm into the middle of a hill, and the giant, embayed and unobtrusive, stands in the rear of pigmy supporters. Not least singularly, neither hill, chasm, nor precipice has a name. On this account I will call the precipice the Cliff without a Name.*

* See Preface

What gave an added terror to its height was its blackness. And upon this dark face the beating of ten thousand west winds had formed a kind of bloom, which had a visual effect not unlike that of a Hambro’ grape. Moreover it seemed to float off into the atmosphere, and inspire terror through the lungs.

‘This piece of quartz, supporting my feet, is on the very nose of the cliff,’ said Knight, breaking the silence after his rigid stoical meditation. ‘Now what you are to do is this. Clamber up my body till your feet are on my shoulders: when you are there you will, I think, be able to climb on to level ground.’

‘What will you do?’

‘Wait whilst you run for assistance.’

‘I ought to have done that in the first place, ought I not?’

‘I was in the act of slipping, and should have reached no stand-point without your weight, in all probability. But don’t let us talk. Be brave, Elfride, and climb.’

She prepared to ascend, saying, 'This is the moment I anticipated when on the tower. I thought it would come!'

'This is not a time for superstition,' said Knight. 'Dismiss all that.'

'I will,' she said humbly.

'Now put your foot into my hand: next the other. That's good — well done. Hold to my shoulder.'

She placed her feet upon the stirrup he made of his hand, and was high enough to get a view of the natural surface of the hill over the bank.

'Can you now climb on to level ground?'

'I am afraid not. I will try.'

'What can you see?'

'The sloping common.'

'What upon it?'

'Purple heather and some grass.'

'Nothing more — no man or human being of any kind?'

'Nobody.'

'Now try to get higher in this way. You see that tuft of sea-pink above you. Get that well into your hand, but don't trust to it entirely. Then step upon my shoulder, and I think you will reach the top.'

With trembling limbs she did exactly as he told her. The preternatural quiet and solemnity of his manner overspread upon herself, and gave her a courage not her own. She made a spring from the top of his shoulder, and was up.

Then she turned to look at him.

By an ill fate, the force downwards of her bound, added to his own weight, had been too much for the block of quartz upon which his feet depended. It was, indeed, originally an igneous protrusion into the enormous masses of black strata, which had since been worn away from the sides of the alien fragment by centuries of frost and rain, and now left it without much support.

It moved. Knight seized a tuft of sea-pink with each hand.

The quartz rock which had been his salvation was worse than useless now. It rolled over, out of sight, and away into the same nether sky that had engulfed the telescope.

One of the tufts by which he held came out at the root, and Knight began to follow the quartz. It was a terrible moment. Elfride uttered a low wild wail of agony, bowed her head, and covered her face with her hands.

Between the turf-covered slope and the gigantic perpendicular rock intervened a weather-worn series of jagged edges, forming a face yet steeper than the former slope. As he slowly slid inch by inch upon these, Knight made a last desperate dash at the lowest tuft of vegetation — the last outlying knot of starved herbage ere the rock appeared in all its bareness. It arrested his further descent. Knight was now literally suspended by his arms; but the incline of the brow being what engineers would call about a quarter in one, it was sufficient to relieve his arms of a portion of his weight, but was very far from offering an adequately flat face to support him.

In spite of this dreadful tension of body and mind, Knight found time for a moment of thankfulness. Elfride was safe.

She lay on her side above him — her fingers clasped. Seeing him again steady, she jumped upon her feet.

‘Now, if I can only save you by running for help!’ she cried. ‘Oh, I would have died instead! Why did you try so hard to deliver me?’ And she turned away wildly to run for assistance.

‘Elfride, how long will it take you to run to Endelstow and back?’

‘Three-quarters of an hour.’

‘That won’t do; my hands will not hold out ten minutes. And is there nobody nearer?’

‘No; unless a chance passer may happen to be.’

‘He would have nothing with him that could save me. Is there a pole or stick of any kind on the common?’

She gazed around. The common was bare of everything but heather and grass.

A minute — perhaps more time — was passed in mute thought by both. On a sudden the blank and helpless agony left her face. She vanished over the bank from his sight.

Knight felt himself in the presence of a personalised loneliness.

CHAPTER XXII

‘A woman’s way.’

Haggard cliffs, of every ugly altitude, are as common as sea-fowl along the line of coast between Exmoor and Land’s End; but this outflanked and encompassed specimen was the ugliest of them all. Their summits are not safe places for scientific experiment on the principles of air-currents, as Knight had now found, to his dismay.

He still clutched the face of the escarpment — not with the frenzied hold of despair, but with a dogged determination to make the most of his every jot of endurance, and so give the longest possible scope to Elfride’s intentions, whatever they might be.

He reclined hand in hand with the world in its infancy. Not a blade, not an insect, which spoke of the present, was between him and the past. The inveterate antagonism of these black precipices to all strugglers for life is in no way more forcibly suggested than by the paucity of tufts of grass, lichens, or confervae on their outermost ledges.

Knight pondered on the meaning of Elfride’s hasty disappearance, but could not avoid an instinctive conclusion that there existed but a doubtful hope for him. As far as he could judge, his sole chance of deliverance lay in the possibility of a rope or pole being brought; and this possibility was remote indeed. The soil upon these high downs was left so untended that they were unenclosed for miles, except by a casual bank or dry wall, and were rarely visited but for the purpose of collecting or counting the flock which found a scanty means of subsistence thereon.

At first, when death appeared improbable, because it had never visited him before, Knight could think of no future, nor of anything connected with his past. He could only look sternly at Nature's treacherous attempt to put an end to him, and strive to thwart her.

From the fact that the cliff formed the inner face of the segment of a huge cylinder, having the sky for a top and the sea for a bottom, which enclosed the cove to the extent of more than a semicircle, he could see the vertical face curving round on each side of him. He looked far down the facade, and realised more thoroughly how it threatened him. Grimness was in every feature, and to its very bowels the inimical shape was desolation.

By one of those familiar conjunctions of things wherewith the inanimate world baits the mind of man when he pauses in moments of suspense, opposite Knight's eyes was an imbedded fossil, standing forth in low relief from the rock. It was a creature with eyes. The eyes, dead and turned to stone, were even now regarding him. It was one of the early crustaceans called Trilobites. Separated by millions of years in their lives, Knight and this underling seemed to have met in their death. It was the single instance within reach of his vision of anything that had ever been alive and had had a body to save, as he himself had now.

The creature represented but a low type of animal existence, for never in their vernal years had the plains indicated by those numberless slaty layers been traversed by an intelligence worthy of the name. Zoophytes, mollusca, shell-fish, were the highest developments of those ancient dates. The immense lapses of time each formation represented had known nothing of the dignity of man. They were grand times, but they were mean times too, and mean were their relics. He was to be with the small in his death.

Knight was a geologist; and such is the supremacy of habit over occasion, as a pioneer of the thoughts of men, that at this dreadful juncture his mind found time to take in, by a momentary sweep, the varied scenes that had had their day between this creature's epoch and his own. There is no place like a cleft landscape for bringing home such imaginings as these.

Time closed up like a fan before him. He saw himself at one extremity of the years, face to face with the beginning and all the intermediate centuries simultaneously. Fierce men, clothed in the hides of beasts, and carrying, for defence and attack, huge clubs and pointed spears, rose from the rock, like the phantoms before the doomed Macbeth. They lived in hollows, woods, and mud huts — perhaps in caves of the neighbouring rocks. Behind them stood an earlier band. No man was there. Huge elephantine forms, the mastodon, the hippopotamus, the tapir, antelopes of monstrous size, the megatherium, and the myledon — all, for the moment, in juxtaposition. Further back, and overlapped by these, were perched huge-billed birds and swinish creatures as large as horses. Still more shadowy were the sinister crocodilian outlines — alligators and other uncouth shapes, culminating in the colossal lizard, the iguanodon. Folded behind were dragon forms and clouds of flying reptiles: still underneath were fishy beings of lower

development; and so on, till the lifetime scenes of the fossil confronting him were a present and modern condition of things. These images passed before Knight's inner eye in less than half a minute, and he was again considering the actual present. Was he to die? The mental picture of Elfride in the world, without himself to cherish her, smote his heart like a whip. He had hoped for deliverance, but what could a girl do? He dared not move an inch. Was Death really stretching out his hand? The previous sensation, that it was improbable he would die, was fainter now.

However, Knight still clung to the cliff.

To those musing weather-beaten West-country folk who pass the greater part of their days and nights out of doors, Nature seems to have moods in other than a poetical sense: predilections for certain deeds at certain times, without any apparent law to govern or season to account for them. She is read as a person with a curious temper; as one who does not scatter kindnesses and cruelties alternately, impartially, and in order, but heartless severities or overwhelming generousities in lawless caprice. Man's case is always that of the prodigal's favourite or the miser's pensioner. In her unfriendly moments there seems a feline fun in her tricks, begotten by a foretaste of her pleasure in swallowing the victim.

Such a way of thinking had been absurd to Knight, but he began to adopt it now. He was first spitted on to a rock. New tortures followed. The rain increased, and persecuted him with an exceptional persistency which he was moved to believe owed its cause to the fact that he was in such a wretched state already. An entirely new order of things could be observed in this introduction of rain upon the scene. It rained upwards instead of down. The strong ascending air carried the rain-drops with it in its race up the escarpment, coming to him with such velocity that they stuck into his flesh like cold needles. Each drop was virtually a shaft, and it pierced him to his skin. The water-shafts seemed to lift him on their points: no downward rain ever had such a torturing effect. In a brief space he was drenched, except in two places. These were on the top of his shoulders and on the crown of his hat.

The wind, though not intense in other situations was strong here. It tugged at his coat and lifted it. We are mostly accustomed to look upon all opposition which is not animate, as that of the stolid, inexorable hand of indifference, which wears out the patience more than the strength. Here, at any rate, hostility did not assume that slow and sickening form. It was a cosmic agency, active, lashing, eager for conquest: determination; not an insensate standing in the way.

Knight had over-estimated the strength of his hands. They were getting weak already. 'She will never come again; she has been gone ten minutes,' he said to himself.

This mistake arose from the unusual compression of his experiences just now: she had really been gone but three.

'As many more minutes will be my end,' he thought.

Next came another instance of the incapacity of the mind to make comparisons at such times.

‘This is a summer afternoon,’ he said, ‘and there can never have been such a heavy and cold rain on a summer day in my life before.’

He was again mistaken. The rain was quite ordinary in quantity; the air in temperature. It was, as is usual, the menacing attitude in which they approached him that magnified their powers.

He again looked straight downwards, the wind and the water-dashes lifting his moustache, scudding up his cheeks, under his eyelids, and into his eyes. This is what he saw down there: the surface of the sea — visually just past his toes, and under his feet; actually one-eighth of a mile, or more than two hundred yards, below them. We colour according to our moods the objects we survey. The sea would have been a deep neutral blue, had happier auspices attended the gazer it was now no otherwise than distinctly black to his vision. That narrow white border was foam, he knew well; but its boisterous tosses were so distant as to appear a pulsation only, and its plashing was barely audible. A white border to a black sea — his funeral pall and its edging.

The world was to some extent turned upside down for him. Rain descended from below. Beneath his feet was aerial space and the unknown; above him was the firm, familiar ground, and upon it all that he loved best.

Pitiless nature had then two voices, and two only. The nearer was the voice of the wind in his ears rising and falling as it mauled and thrust him hard or softly. The second and distant one was the moan of that unplummeted ocean below and afar — rubbing its restless flank against the Cliff without a Name.

Knight perseveringly held fast. Had he any faith in Elfride? Perhaps. Love is faith, and faith, like a gathered flower, will rootlessly live on.

Nobody would have expected the sun to shine on such an evening as this. Yet it appeared, low down upon the sea. Not with its natural golden fringe, sweeping the furthest ends of the landscape, not with the strange glare of whiteness which it sometimes puts on as an alternative to colour, but as a splotch of vermilion red upon a leaden ground — a red face looking on with a drunken leer.

Most men who have brains know it, and few are so foolish as to disguise this fact from themselves or others, even though an ostentatious display may be called self-conceit. Knight, without showing it much, knew that his intellect was above the average. And he thought — he could not help thinking — that his death would be a deliberate loss to earth of good material; that such an experiment in killing might have been practised upon some less developed life.

A fancy some people hold, when in a bitter mood, is that inexorable circumstance only tries to prevent what intelligence attempts. Renounce a desire for a long-contested position, and go on another tack, and after a while the prize is thrown at you, seemingly in disappointment that no more tantalising is possible.

Knight gave up thoughts of life utterly and entirely, and turned to contemplate the Dark Valley and the unknown future beyond. Into the shadowy depths of these speculations we will not follow him. Let it suffice to state what ensued.

At that moment of taking no more thought for this life, something disturbed the outline of the bank above him. A spot appeared. It was the head of Elfride.

Knight immediately prepared to welcome life again.

The expression of a face consigned to utter loneliness, when a friend first looks in upon it, is moving in the extreme. In rowing seaward to a light-ship or sea-girt lighthouse, where, without any immediate terror of death, the inmates experience the gloom of monotonous seclusion, the grateful eloquence of their countenances at the greeting, expressive of thankfulness for the visit, is enough to stir the emotions of the most careless observer.

Knight's upward look at Elfride was of a nature with, but far transcending, such an instance as this. The lines of his face had deepened to furrows, and every one of them thanked her visibly. His lips moved to the word 'Elfride,' though the emotion evolved no sound. His eyes passed all description in their combination of the whole diapason of eloquence, from lover's deep love to fellow-man's gratitude for a token of remembrance from one of his kind.

Elfride had come back. What she had come to do he did not know. She could only look on at his death, perhaps. Still, she had come back, and not deserted him utterly, and it was much.

It was a novelty in the extreme to see Henry Knight, to whom Elfride was but a child, who had swayed her as a tree sways a bird's nest, who mastered her and made her weep most bitterly at her own insignificance, thus thankful for a sight of her face. She looked down upon him, her face glistening with rain and tears. He smiled faintly.

'How calm he is!' she thought. 'How great and noble he is to be so calm!' She would have died ten times for him then.

The gliding form of the steamboat caught her eye: she heeded it no longer.

'How much longer can you wait?' came from her pale lips and along the wind to his position.

'Four minutes,' said Knight in a weaker voice than her own.

'But with a good hope of being saved?'

'Seven or eight.'

He now noticed that in her arms she bore a bundle of white linen, and that her form was singularly attenuated. So preternaturally thin and flexible was Elfride at this moment, that she appeared to bend under the light blows of the rain-shafts, as they struck into her sides and bosom, and splintered into spray on her face. There is nothing like a thorough drenching for reducing the protuberances of clothes, but Elfride's seemed to cling to her like a glove.

Without heeding the attack of the clouds further than by raising her hand and wiping away the spirits of rain when they went more particularly into her eyes, she sat down and hurriedly began rending the linen into strips. These she knotted end to end, and afterwards twisted them like the strands of a cord. In a short space of time she had formed a perfect rope by this means, six or seven yards long.

'Can you wait while I bind it?' she said, anxiously extending her gaze down to him.

‘Yes, if not very long. Hope has given me a wonderful instalment of strength.’

Elfride dropped her eyes again, tore the remaining material into narrow tape-like ligaments, knotted each to each as before, but on a smaller scale, and wound the lengthy string she had thus formed round and round the linen rope, which, without this binding, had a tendency to spread abroad.

‘Now,’ said Knight, who, watching the proceedings intently, had by this time not only grasped her scheme, but reasoned further on, ‘I can hold three minutes longer yet. And do you use the time in testing the strength of the knots, one by one.’

She at once obeyed, tested each singly by putting her foot on the rope between each knot, and pulling with her hands. One of the knots slipped.

‘Oh, think! It would have broken but for your forethought,’ Elfride exclaimed apprehensively.

She retied the two ends. The rope was now firm in every part.

‘When you have let it down,’ said Knight, already resuming his position of ruling power, ‘go back from the edge of the slope, and over the bank as far as the rope will allow you. Then lean down, and hold the end with both hands.’

He had first thought of a safer plan for his own deliverance, but it involved the disadvantage of possibly endangering her life.

‘I have tied it round my waist,’ she cried, ‘and I will lean directly upon the bank, holding with my hands as well.’

It was the arrangement he had thought of, but would not suggest.

‘I will raise and drop it three times when I am behind the bank,’ she continued, ‘to signify that I am ready. Take care, oh, take the greatest care, I beg you!’

She dropped the rope over him, to learn how much of its length it would be necessary to expend on that side of the bank, went back, and disappeared as she had done before.

The rope was trailing by Knight’s shoulders. In a few moments it twitched three times.

He waited yet a second or two, then laid hold.

The incline of this upper portion of the precipice, to the length only of a few feet, useless to a climber empty-handed, was invaluable now. Not more than half his weight depended entirely on the linen rope. Half a dozen extensions of the arms, alternating with half a dozen seizures of the rope with his feet, brought him up to the level of the soil.

He was saved, and by Elfride.

He extended his cramped limbs like an awakened sleeper, and sprang over the bank.

At sight of him she leapt to her feet with almost a shriek of joy. Knight’s eyes met hers, and with supreme eloquence the glance of each told a long-concealed tale of emotion in that short half-moment. Moved by an impulse neither could resist, they ran together and into each other’s arms.

At the moment of embracing, Elfride’s eyes involuntarily flashed towards the Puffin steamboat. It had doubled the point, and was no longer to be seen.

An overwhelming rush of exultation at having delivered the man she revered from one of the most terrible forms of death, shook the gentle girl to the centre of her soul. It merged in a defiance of duty to Stephen, and a total recklessness as to plighted faith. Every nerve of her will was now in entire subjection to her feeling — volition as a guiding power had forsaken her. To remain passive, as she remained now, encircled by his arms, was a sufficiently complete result — a glorious crown to all the years of her life. Perhaps he was only grateful, and did not love her. No matter: it was infinitely more to be even the slave of the greater than the queen of the less. Some such sensation as this, though it was not recognized as a finished thought, raced along the impressionable soul of Elfride.

Regarding their attitude, it was impossible for two persons to go nearer to a kiss than went Knight and Elfride during those minutes of impulsive embrace in the pelting rain. Yet they did not kiss. Knight's peculiarity of nature was such that it would not allow him to take advantage of the unguarded and passionate avowal she had tacitly made.

Elfride recovered herself, and gently struggled to be free.

He reluctantly relinquished her, and then surveyed her from crown to toe. She seemed as small as an infant. He perceived whence she had obtained the rope.

'Elfride, my Elfride!' he exclaimed in gratified amazement.

'I must leave you now,' she said, her face doubling its red, with an expression between gladness and shame 'You follow me, but at some distance.'

'The rain and wind pierce you through; the chill will kill you. God bless you for such devotion! Take my coat and put it on.'

'No; I shall get warm running.'

Elfride had absolutely nothing between her and the weather but her exterior robe or 'costume.' The door had been made upon a woman's wit, and it had found its way out. Behind the bank, whilst Knight reclined upon the dizzy slope waiting for death, she had taken off her whole clothing, and replaced only her outer bodice and skirt. Every thread of the remainder lay upon the ground in the form of a woollen and cotton rope.

'I am used to being wet through,' she added. 'I have been drenched on Pansy dozens of times. Good-bye till we meet, clothed and in our right minds, by the fireside at home!'

She then ran off from him through the pelting rain like a hare; or more like a pheasant when, scampering away with a lowered tail, it has a mind to fly, but does not. Elfride was soon out of sight.

Knight felt uncomfortably wet and chilled, but glowing with fervour nevertheless. He fully appreciated Elfride's girlish delicacy in refusing his escort in the meagre habiliments she wore, yet felt that necessary abstraction of herself for a short half-hour as a most grievous loss to him.

He gathered up her knotted and twisted plumage of linen, lace, and embroidery work, and laid it across his arm. He noticed on the ground an envelope, limp and wet. In endeavouring to restore this to its proper shape, he loosened from the envelope a piece of paper it had contained, which was seized by the wind in falling from Knight's

hand. It was blown to the right, blown to the left — it floated to the edge of the cliff and over the sea, where it was hurled aloft. It twirled in the air, and then flew back over his head.

Knight followed the paper, and secured it. Having done so, he looked to discover if it had been worth securing.

The troublesome sheet was a banker's receipt for two hundred pounds, placed to the credit of Miss Swancourt, which the impractical girl had totally forgotten she carried with her.

Knight folded it as carefully as its moist condition would allow, put it in his pocket, and followed Elfride.

CHAPTER XXIII

'Should auld acquaintance be forgot?'

By this time Stephen Smith had stepped out upon the quay at Castle Boterel, and breathed his native air.

A darker skin, a more pronounced moustache, and an incipient beard, were the chief additions and changes noticeable in his appearance.

In spite of the falling rain, which had somewhat lessened, he took a small valise in his hand, and, leaving the remainder of his luggage at the inn, ascended the hills towards East Endelstow. This place lay in a vale of its own, further inland than the west village, and though so near it, had little of physical feature in common with the latter. East Endelstow was more wooded and fertile: it boasted of Lord Luxellian's mansion and park, and was free from those bleak open uplands which lent such an air of desolation to the vicinage of the coast — always excepting the small valley in which stood the vicarage and Mrs. Swancourt's old house, The Craggs.

Stephen had arrived nearly at the summit of the ridge when the rain again increased its volume, and, looking about for temporary shelter, he ascended a steep path which penetrated dense hazel bushes in the lower part of its course. Further up it emerged upon a ledge immediately over the turnpike-road, and sheltered by an overhanging face of rubble rock, with bushes above. For a reason of his own he made this spot his refuge from the storm, and turning his face to the left, conned the landscape as a book.

He was overlooking the valley containing Elfride's residence.

From this point of observation the prospect exhibited the peculiarity of being either brilliant foreground or the subdued tone of distance, a sudden dip in the surface of the country lowering out of sight all the intermediate prospect. In apparent contact with the trees and bushes growing close beside him appeared the distant tract, terminated suddenly by the brink of the series of cliffs which culminated in the tall giant without a name — small and unimportant as here beheld. A leaf on a bough at Stephen's elbow blotted out a whole hill in the contrasting district far away; a green bunch of nuts covered a complete upland there, and the great cliff itself was outvied by a pigmy crag

in the bank hard by him. Stephen had looked upon these things hundreds of times before to-day, but he had never viewed them with such tenderness as now.

Stepping forward in this direction yet a little further, he could see the tower of West Endelstow Church, beneath which he was to meet his Elfride that night. And at the same time he noticed, coming over the hill from the cliffs, a white speck in motion. It seemed first to be a sea-gull flying low, but ultimately proved to be a human figure, running with great rapidity. The form flitted on, heedless of the rain which had caused Stephen's halt in this place, dropped down the heathery hill, entered the vale, and was out of sight.

Whilst he meditated upon the meaning of this phenomenon, he was surprised to see swim into his ken from the same point of departure another moving speck, as different from the first as well could be, insomuch that it was perceptible only by its blackness. Slowly and regularly it took the same course, and there was not much doubt that this was the form of a man. He, too, gradually descended from the upper levels, and was lost in the valley below.

The rain had by this time again abated, and Stephen returned to the road. Looking ahead, he saw two men and a cart. They were soon obscured by the intervention of a high hedge. Just before they emerged again he heard voices in conversation.

"A must soon be in the naighbourhood, too, if so be he's a-coming," said a tenor tongue, which Stephen instantly recognized as Martin Cannister's.

"A must 'a b'lieve," said another voice — that of Stephen's father.

Stephen stepped forward, and came before them face to face. His father and Martin were walking, dressed in their second best suits, and beside them rambled along a grizzel horse and brightly painted spring-cart.

"All right, Mr. Cannister; here's the lost man!" exclaimed young Smith, entering at once upon the old style of greeting. "Father, here I am."

"All right, my sonny; and glad I be for't!" returned John Smith, overjoyed to see the young man. "How be ye? Well, come along home, and don't let's bide out here in the damp. Such weather must be terrible bad for a young chap just come from a fiery nation like Indy; hey, naibour Cannister?"

"Trew, trew. And about getting home his traps? Boxes, monstrous bales, and noble packages of foreign description, I make no doubt?"

"Hardly all that," said Stephen laughing.

"We brought the cart, maning to go right on to Castle Boterel afore ye landed," said his father. "'Put in the horse," says Martin. "'Ay," says I, "so we will;" and did it straightway. Now, maybe, Martin had better go on wi' the cart for the things, and you and I walk home-along.'

"And I shall be back a'most as soon as you. Peggy is a pretty step still, though time d' begin to tell upon her as upon the rest o' us."

Stephen told Martin where to find his baggage, and then continued his journey homeward in the company of his father.

‘Owing to your coming a day sooner than we first expected,’ said John, ‘you’ll find us in a turk of a mess, sir — ”sir,” says I to my own son! but ye’ve gone up so, Stephen. We’ve killed the pig this morning for ye, thinking ye’d be hungry, and glad of a morsel of fresh mate. And ‘a won’t be cut up till to-night. However, we can make ye a good supper of fry, which will chaw up well wi’ a dab o’ mustard and a few nice new taters, and a drop of shilling ale to wash it down. Your mother have scrubbed the house through because ye were coming, and dusted all the chimmer furniture, and bought a new basin and jug of a travelling crockery-woman that came to our door, and scoured the cannel-sticks, and claned the winders! Ay, I don’t know what ‘a ha’n’t a done. Never were such a steer, ‘a b’lieve.’

Conversation of this kind and inquiries of Stephen for his mother’s wellbeing occupied them for the remainder of the journey. When they drew near the river, and the cottage behind it, they could hear the master-mason’s clock striking off the by-gone hours of the day at intervals of a quarter of a minute, during which intervals Stephen’s imagination readily pictured his mother’s forefinger wandering round the dial in company with the minute-hand.

‘The clock stopped this morning, and your mother in putting en right seemingly,’ said his father in an explanatory tone; and they went up the garden to the door.

When they had entered, and Stephen had dutifully and warmly greeted his mother — who appeared in a cotton dress of a dark-blue ground, covered broadcast with a multitude of new and full moons, stars, and planets, with an occasional dash of a comet-like aspect to diversify the scene — the crackle of cart-wheels was heard outside, and Martin Cannister stamped in at the doorway, in the form of a pair of legs beneath a great box, his body being nowhere visible. When the luggage had been all taken down, and Stephen had gone upstairs to change his clothes, Mrs. Smith’s mind seemed to recover a lost thread.

‘Really our clock is not worth a penny,’ she said, turning to it and attempting to start the pendulum.

‘Stopped again?’ inquired Martin with commiseration.

‘Yes, sure,’ replied Mrs. Smith; and continued after the manner of certain matrons, to whose tongues the harmony of a subject with a casual mood is a greater recommendation than its pertinence to the occasion, ‘John would spend pounds a year upon the jimcrack old thing, if he might, in having it claned, when at the same time you may doctor it yourself as well. “The clock’s stopped again, John,” I say to him. “Better have en claned,” says he. There’s five shillings. “That clock grinds again,” I say to en. “Better have en claned,” ‘a says again. “That clock strikes wrong, John,” says I. “Better have en claned,” he goes on. The wheels would have been polished to skeletons by this time if I had listened to en, and I assure you we could have bought a chainey-faced beauty wi’ the good money we’ve flung away these last ten years upon this old green-faced mortal. And, Martin, you must be wet. My son is gone up to change. John is damper than I should like to be, but ‘a calls it nothing. Some of Mrs. Swancourt’s servants

have been here — they ran in out of the rain when going for a walk — and I assure you the state of their bonnets was frightful.’

‘How’s the folks? We’ve been over to Castle Boterel, and what wi’ running and stopping out of the storms, my poor head is beyond everything! fizz, fizz fizz; ‘tis frying o’ fish from morning to night,’ said a cracked voice in the doorway at this instant.

‘Lord so’s, who’s that?’ said Mrs. Smith, in a private exclamation, and turning round saw William Worm, endeavouring to make himself look passing civil and friendly by overspreading his face with a large smile that seemed to have no connection with the humour he was in. Behind him stood a woman about twice his size, with a large umbrella over her head. This was Mrs. Worm, William’s wife.

‘Come in, William,’ said John Smith. ‘We don’t kill a pig every day. And you, likewise, Mrs. Worm. I make ye welcome. Since ye left Parson Swancourt, William, I don’t see much of ‘ee.’

‘No, for to tell the truth, since I took to the turn-pike-gate line, I’ve been out but little, coming to church o’ Sundays not being my duty now, as ‘twas in a parson’s family, you see. However, our boy is able to mind the gate now, and I said, says I, “Barbara, let’s call and see John Smith.”’

‘I am sorry to hear yer pore head is so bad still.’

‘Ay, I assure you that frying o’ fish is going on for nights and days. And, you know, sometimes ‘tisn’t only fish, but rashers o’ bacon and inions. Ay, I can hear the fat pop and fizz as nateral as life; can’t I, Barbara?’

Mrs. Worm, who had been all this time engaged in closing her umbrella, corroborated this statement, and now, coming indoors, showed herself to be a wide-faced, comfortable-looking woman, with a wart upon her cheek, bearing a small tuft of hair in its centre.

‘Have ye ever tried anything to cure yer noise, Maister Worm?’ inquired Martin Cannister.

‘Oh ay; bless ye, I’ve tried everything. Ay, Providence is a merciful man, and I have hoped He’d have found it out by this time, living so many years in a parson’s family, too, as I have, but ‘a don’t seem to relieve me. Ay, I be a poor wambling man, and life’s a mint o’ trouble!’

‘True, mournful true, William Worm. ‘Tis so. The world wants looking to, or ‘tis all sixes and sevens wi’ us.’

‘Take your things off, Mrs. Worm,’ said Mrs. Smith. ‘We be rather in a muddle, to tell the truth, for my son is just dropped in from Indy a day sooner than we expected, and the pig-killer is coming presently to cut up.’

Mrs. Barbara Worm, not wishing to take any mean advantage of persons in a muddle by observing them, removed her bonnet and mantle with eyes fixed upon the flowers in the plot outside the door.

‘What beautiful tiger-lilies!’ said Mrs. Worm.

‘Yes, they be very well, but such a trouble to me on account of the children that come here. They will go eating the berries on the stem, and call ‘em currants. Taste wi’ junivals is quite fancy, really.’

‘And your snapdragons look as fierce as ever.’

‘Well, really,’ answered Mrs. Smith, entering didactically into the subject, ‘they are more like Christians than flowers. But they make up well enough wi’ the rest, and don’t require much tending. And the same can be said o’ these miller’s wheels. ‘Tis a flower I like very much, though so simple. John says he never cares about the flowers o’ ‘em, but men have no eye for anything neat. He says his favourite flower is a cauliflower. And I assure you I tremble in the springtime, for ‘tis perfect murder.’

‘You don’t say so, Mrs. Smith!’

‘John digs round the roots, you know. In goes his blundering spade, through roots, bulbs, everything that hasn’t got a good show above ground, turning ‘em up cut all to slices. Only the very last fall I went to move some tulips, when I found every bulb upside down, and the stems crooked round. He had turned ‘em over in the spring, and the cunning creatures had soon found that heaven was not where it used to be.’

‘What’s that long-favoured flower under the hedge?’

‘They? O Lord, they are the horrid Jacob’s ladders! Instead of praising ‘em, I be mad wi’ ‘em for being so ready to bide where they are not wanted. They be very well in their way, but I do not care for things that neglect won’t kill. Do what I will, dig, drag, scrap, pull, I get too many of ‘em. I chop the roots: up they’ll come, treble strong. Throw ‘em over hedge; there they’ll grow, staring me in the face like a hungry dog driven away, and creep back again in a week or two the same as before. ‘Tis Jacob’s ladder here, Jacob’s ladder there, and plant ‘em where nothing in the world will grow, you get crowds of ‘em in a month or two. John made a new manure mixen last summer, and he said, “Maria, now if you’ve got any flowers or such like, that you don’t want, you may plant ‘em round my mixen so as to hide it a bit, though ‘tis not likely anything of much value will grow there.” I thought, “There’s them Jacob’s ladders; I’ll put them there, since they can’t do harm in such a place;” and I planted the Jacob’s ladders sure enough. They growed, and they growed, in the mixen and out of the mixen, all over the litter, covering it quite up. When John wanted to use it about the garden, ‘a said, “Nation seize them Jacob’s ladders of yours, Maria! They’ve eat the goodness out of every morsel of my manure, so that ‘tis no better than sand itself!” Sure enough the hungry mortals had. ‘Tis my belief that in the secret souls o’ ‘em, Jacob’s ladders be weeds, and not flowers at all, if the truth was known.’

Robert Lickpan, pig-killer and carrier, arrived at this moment. The fatted animal hanging in the back kitchen was cleft down the middle of its backbone, Mrs. Smith being meanwhile engaged in cooking supper.

Between the cutting and chopping, ale was handed round, and Worm and the pig-killer listened to John Smith’s description of the meeting with Stephen, with eyes blankly fixed upon the table-cloth, in order that nothing in the external world should interrupt their efforts to conjure up the scene correctly.

Stephen came downstairs in the middle of the story, and after the little interruption occasioned by his entrance and welcome, the narrative was again continued, precisely as if he had not been there at all, and was told inclusively to him, as to somebody who knew nothing about the matter.

“Ay,” I said, as I caught sight o’ en through the brimbles, “that’s the lad, for I d’ know en by his grand-father’s walk;” for ‘a stapped out like poor father for all the world. Still there was a touch o’ the frisky that set me wondering. ‘A got closer, and I said, “That’s the lad, for I d’ know en by his carrying a black case like a travelling man.” Still, a road is common to all the world, and there be more travelling men than one. But I kept my eye cocked, and I said to Martin, “‘Tis the boy, now, for I d’ know en by the wold twirl o’ the stick and the family step.” Then ‘a come closer, and a’ said, “All right.” I could swear to en then.’

Stephen’s personal appearance was next criticised.

‘He d’ look a deal thinner in face, surely, than when I seed en at the parson’s, and never knowed en, if ye’ll believe me,’ said Martin.

‘Ay, there,’ said another, without removing his eyes from Stephen’s face, ‘I should ha’ knowed en anywhere. ‘Tis his father’s nose to a T.’

‘It has been often remarked,’ said Stephen modestly.

‘And he’s certainly taller,’ said Martin, letting his glance run over Stephen’s form from bottom to top.

‘I was thinking ‘a was exactly the same height,’ Worm replied.

‘Bless thy soul, that’s because he’s bigger round likewise.’ And the united eyes all moved to Stephen’s waist.

‘I be a poor wambling man, but I can make allowances,’ said William Worm. ‘Ah, sure, and how he came as a stranger and pilgrim to Parson Swancourt’s that time, not a soul knowing en after so many years! Ay, life’s a strange picter, Stephen: but I suppose I must say Sir to ye?’

‘Oh, it is not necessary at present,’ Stephen replied, though mentally resolving to avoid the vicinity of that familiar friend as soon as he had made pretensions to the hand of Elfride.

‘Ah, well,’ said Worm musingly, ‘some would have looked for no less than a Sir. There’s a sight of difference in people.’

‘And in pigs likewise,’ observed John Smith, looking at the halved carcass of his own.

Robert Lickpan, the pig-killer, here seemed called upon to enter the lists of conversation.

‘Yes, they’ve got their particular naters good-now,’ he remarked initially. ‘Many’s the rum-tempered pig I’ve knowed.’

‘I don’t doubt it, Master Lickpan,’ answered Martin, in a tone expressing that his convictions, no less than good manners, demanded the reply.

‘Yes,’ continued the pig-killer, as one accustomed to be heard. ‘One that I knowed was deaf and dumb, and we couldn’t make out what was the matter wi’ the pig. ‘A

would eat well enough when 'a seed the trough, but when his back was turned, you might a-rattled the bucket all day, the poor soul never heard ye. Ye could play tricks upon en behind his back, and a' wouldn't find it out no quicker than poor deaf Grammer Cates. But a' fatted well, and I never seed a pig open better when a' was killed, and 'a was very tender eating, very; as pretty a bit of mate as ever you see; you could suck that mate through a quill.

'And another I knowed,' resumed the killer, after quietly letting a pint of ale run down his throat of its own accord, and setting down the cup with mathematical exactness upon the spot from which he had raised it — 'another went out of his mind.'

'How very mournful!' murmured Mrs. Worm.

'Ay, poor thing, 'a did! As clean out of his mind as the cleverest Christian could go. In early life 'a was very melancholy, and never seemed a hopeful pig by no means. 'Twas Andrew Stainer's pig — that's whose pig 'twas.'

'I can mind the pig well enough,' attested John Smith.

'And a pretty little porker 'a was. And you all know Farmer Buckle's sort? Every jack o' em suffer from the rheumatism to this day, owing to a damp sty they lived in when they were striplings, as 'twere.'

'Well, now we'll weigh,' said John.

'If so be he were not so fine, we'd weigh en whole: but as he is, we'll take a side at a time. John, you can mind my old joke, ey?'

'I do so; though 'twas a good few years ago I first heard en.'

'Yes,' said Lickpan, 'that there old familiar joke have been in our family for generations, I may say. My father used that joke regular at pig-killings for more than five and forty years — the time he followed the calling. And 'a told me that 'a had it from his father when he was quite a chiel, who made use o' en just the same at every killing more or less; and pig-killings were pig-killings in those days.'

'Trewly they were.'

'I've never heard the joke,' said Mrs. Smith tentatively.

'Nor I,' chimed in Mrs. Worm, who, being the only other lady in the room, felt bound by the laws of courtesy to feel like Mrs. Smith in everything.

'Surely, surely you have,' said the killer, looking sceptically at the benighted females. 'However, 'tisn't much — I don't wish to say it is. It commences like this: "Bob will tell the weight of your pig, 'a b'lieve," says I. The congregation of neighbours think I mane my son Bob, naturally; but the secret is that I mane the bob o' the steelyard. Ha, ha, ha!'

'Haw, haw, haw!' laughed Martin Cannister, who had heard the explanation of this striking story for the hundredth time.

'Huh, huh, huh!' laughed John Smith, who had heard it for the thousandth.

'Hee, hee, hee!' laughed William Worm, who had never heard it at all, but was afraid to say so.

'Thy grandfather, Robert, must have been a wide-awake chap to make that story,' said Martin Cannister, subsiding to a placid aspect of delighted criticism.

‘He had a head, by all account. And, you see, as the first-born of the Lickpans have all been Roberts, they’ve all been Bobs, so the story was handed down to the present day.’

‘Poor Joseph, your second boy, will never be able to bring it out in company, which is rather unfortunate,’ said Mrs. Worm thoughtfully.

‘A won’t. Yes, grandfer was a clever chap, as ye say; but I knowed a cleverer. ‘Twas my uncle Levi. Uncle Levi made a snuff-box that should be a puzzle to his friends to open. He used to hand en round at wedding parties, christenings, funerals, and in other jolly company, and let ‘em try their skill. This extraordinary snuff-box had a spring behind that would push in and out — a hinge where seemed to be the cover; a slide at the end, a screw in front, and knobs and queer notches everywhere. One man would try the spring, another would try the screw, another would try the slide; but try as they would, the box wouldn’t open. And they couldn’t open en, and they didn’t open en. Now what might you think was the secret of that box?’

All put on an expression that their united thoughts were inadequate to the occasion.

‘Why the box wouldn’t open at all. ‘A were made not to open, and ye might have tried till the end of Revelations, ‘twould have been as naught, for the box were glued all round.’

‘A very deep man to have made such a box.’

‘Yes. ‘Twas like uncle Levi all over.’

‘‘Twas. I can mind the man very well. Tallest man ever I seed.’

‘A was so. He never slept upon a bedstead after he growed up a hard boy-chap — never could get one long enough. When ‘a lived in that little small house by the pond, he used to have to leave open his chamber door every night at going to his bed, and let his feet poke out upon the landing.’

‘He’s dead and gone now, nevertheless, poor man, as we all shall,’ observed Worm, to fill the pause which followed the conclusion of Robert Lickpan’s speech.

The weighing and cutting up was pursued amid an animated discourse on Stephen’s travels; and at the finish, the first-fruits of the day’s slaughter, fried in onions, were then turned from the pan into a dish on the table, each piece steaming and hissing till it reached their very mouths.

It must be owned that the gentlemanly son of the house looked rather out of place in the course of this operation. Nor was his mind quite philosophic enough to allow him to be comfortable with these old-established persons, his father’s friends. He had never lived long at home — scarcely at all since his childhood. The presence of William Worm was the most awkward feature of the case, for, though Worm had left the house of Mr. Swancourt, the being hand-in-glove with a *ci-devant* servitor reminded Stephen too forcibly of the vicar’s classification of himself before he went from England. Mrs. Smith was conscious of the defect in her arrangements which had brought about the undesired conjunction. She spoke to Stephen privately.

‘I am above having such people here, Stephen; but what could I do? And your father is so rough in his nature that he’s more mixed up with them than need be.’

‘Never mind, mother,’ said Stephen; ‘I’ll put up with it now.’

‘When we leave my lord’s service, and get further up the country — as I hope we shall soon — it will be different. We shall be among fresh people, and in a larger house, and shall keep ourselves up a bit, I hope.’

‘Is Miss Swancourt at home, do you know?’ Stephen inquired

‘Yes, your father saw her this morning.’

‘Do you often see her?’

‘Scarcely ever. Mr. Glim, the curate, calls occasionally, but the Swancourts don’t come into the village now any more than to drive through it. They dine at my lord’s oftener than they used. Ah, here’s a note was brought this morning for you by a boy.’

Stephen eagerly took the note and opened it, his mother watching him. He read what Elfride had written and sent before she started for the cliff that afternoon:

‘Yes; I will meet you in the church at nine to-night. — E. S.’

‘I don’t know, Stephen,’ his mother said meaningly, ‘whe’r you still think about Miss Elfride, but if I were you I wouldn’t concern about her. They say that none of old Mrs. Swancourt’s money will come to her step-daughter.’

‘I see the evening has turned out fine; I am going out for a little while to look round the place,’ he said, evading the direct query. ‘Probably by the time I return our visitors will be gone, and we’ll have a more confidential talk.’

CHAPTER XXIV

‘Breeze, bird, and flower confess the hour.’

The rain had ceased since the sunset, but it was a cloudy night; and the light of the moon, softened and dispersed by its misty veil, was distributed over the land in pale gray.

A dark figure stepped from the doorway of John Smith’s river-side cottage, and strode rapidly towards West Endelstow with a light footstep. Soon ascending from the lower levels he turned a corner, followed a cart-track, and saw the tower of the church he was in quest of distinctly shaped forth against the sky. In less than half an hour from the time of starting he swung himself over the churchyard stile.

The wild irregular enclosure was as much as ever an integral part of the old hill. The grass was still long, the graves were shaped precisely as passing years chose to alter them from their orthodox form as laid down by Martin Cannister, and by Stephen’s own grandfather before him.

A sound sped into the air from the direction in which Castle Boterel lay. It was the striking of the church clock, distinct in the still atmosphere as if it had come from the tower hard by, which, wrapt in its solitary silentness, gave out no such sounds of life.

‘One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine.’ Stephen carefully counted the strokes, though he well knew their number beforehand. Nine o’clock. It was the hour Elfride had herself named as the most convenient for meeting him.

Stephen stood at the door of the porch and listened. He could have heard the softest breathing of any person within the porch; nobody was there. He went inside the doorway, sat down upon the stone bench, and waited with a beating heart.

The faint sounds heard only accentuated the silence. The rising and falling of the sea, far away along the coast, was the most important. A minor sound was the scurr of a distant night-hawk. Among the minutest where all were minute were the light settlement of gossamer fragments floating in the air, a toad humbly labouring along through the grass near the entrance, the crackle of a dead leaf which a worm was endeavouring to pull into the earth, a waft of air, getting nearer and nearer, and expiring at his feet under the burden of a winged seed.

Among all these soft sounds came not the only soft sound he cared to hear — the footfall of Elfride.

For a whole quarter of an hour Stephen sat thus intent, without moving a muscle. At the end of that time he walked to the west front of the church. Turning the corner of the tower, a white form stared him in the face. He started back, and recovered himself. It was the tomb of young farmer Jethway, looking still as fresh and as new as when it was first erected, the white stone in which it was hewn having a singular weirdness amid the dark blue slabs from local quarries, of which the whole remaining gravestones were formed.

He thought of the night when he had sat thereon with Elfride as his companion, and well remembered his regret that she had received, even unwillingly, earlier homage than his own. But his present tangible anxiety reduced such a feeling to sentimental nonsense in comparison; and he strolled on over the graves to the border of the churchyard, whence in the daytime could be clearly seen the vicarage and the present residence of the Swancourts. No footstep was discernible upon the path up the hill, but a light was shining from a window in the last-named house.

Stephen knew there could be no mistake about the time or place, and no difficulty about keeping the engagement. He waited yet longer, passing from impatience into a mood which failed to take any account of the lapse of time. He was awakened from his reverie by Castle Boterel clock.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, TEN.

One little fall of the hammer in addition to the number it had been sharp pleasure to hear, and what a difference to him!

He left the churchyard on the side opposite to his point of entrance, and went down the hill. Slowly he drew near the gate of her house. This he softly opened, and walked up the gravel drive to the door. Here he paused for several minutes.

At the expiration of that time the murmured speech of a manly voice came out to his ears through an open window behind the corner of the house. This was responded to by a clear soft laugh. It was the laugh of Elfride.

Stephen was conscious of a gnawing pain at his heart. He retreated as he had come. There are disappointments which wring us, and there are those which inflict a wound whose mark we bear to our graves. Such are so keen that no future gratification of the

same desire can ever obliterate them: they become registered as a permanent loss of happiness. Such a one was Stephen's now: the crowning aureola of the dream had been the meeting here by stealth; and if Elfride had come to him only ten minutes after he had turned away, the disappointment would have been recognizable still.

When the young man reached home he found there a letter which had arrived in his absence. Believing it to contain some reason for her non-appearance, yet unable to imagine one that could justify her, he hastily tore open the envelope.

The paper contained not a word from Elfride. It was the deposit-note for his two hundred pounds. On the back was the form of a cheque, and this she had filled up with the same sum, payable to the bearer.

Stephen was confounded. He attempted to divine her motive. Considering how limited was his knowledge of her later actions, he guessed rather shrewdly that, between the time of her sending the note in the morning and the evening's silent refusal of his gift, something had occurred which had caused a total change in her attitude towards him.

He knew not what to do. It seemed absurd now to go to her father next morning, as he had purposed, and ask for an engagement with her, a possibility impending all the while that Elfride herself would not be on his side. Only one course recommended itself as wise. To wait and see what the days would bring forth; to go and execute his commissions in Birmingham; then to return, learn if anything had happened, and try what a meeting might do; perhaps her surprise at his backwardness would bring her forward to show latent warmth as decidedly as in old times.

This act of patience was in keeping only with the nature of a man precisely of Stephen's constitution. Nine men out of ten would perhaps have rushed off, got into her presence, by fair means or foul, and provoked a catastrophe of some sort. Possibly for the better, probably for the worse.

He started for Birmingham the next morning. A day's delay would have made no difference; but he could not rest until he had begun and ended the programme proposed to himself. Bodily activity will sometimes take the sting out of anxiety as completely as assurance itself.

CHAPTER XXV

'Mine own familiar friend.'

During these days of absence Stephen lived under alternate conditions. Whenever his emotions were active, he was in agony. Whenever he was not in agony, the business in hand had driven out of his mind by sheer force all deep reflection on the subject of Elfride and love.

By the time he took his return journey at the week's end, Stephen had very nearly worked himself up to an intention to call and see her face to face. On this occasion also he adopted his favourite route — by the little summer steamer from Bristol to

Castle Boterel; the time saved by speed on the railway being wasted at junctions, and in following a devious course.

It was a bright silent evening at the beginning of September when Smith again set foot in the little town. He felt inclined to linger awhile upon the quay before ascending the hills, having formed a romantic intention to go home by way of her house, yet not wishing to wander in its neighbourhood till the evening shades should sufficiently screen him from observation.

And thus waiting for night's nearer approach, he watched the placid scene, over which the pale luminosity of the west cast a sorrowful monochrome, that became slowly embrowned by the dusk. A star appeared, and another, and another. They sparkled amid the yards and rigging of the two coal brigs lying alangside, as if they had been tiny lamps suspended in the ropes. The masts rocked sleepily to the infinitesimal flux of the tide, which clucked and gurgled with idle regularity in nooks and holes of the harbour wall.

The twilight was now quite pronounced enough for his purpose; and as, rather sad at heart, he was about to move on, a little boat containing two persons glided up the middle of the harbour with the lightness of a shadow. The boat came opposite him, passed on, and touched the landing-steps at the further end. One of its occupants was a man, as Stephen had known by the easy stroke of the oars. When the pair ascended the steps, and came into greater prominence, he was enabled to discern that the second personage was a woman; also that she wore a white decoration — apparently a feather — in her hat or bonnet, which spot of white was the only distinctly visible portion of her clothing.

Stephen remained a moment in their rear, and they passed on, when he pursued his way also, and soon forgot the circumstance. Having crossed a bridge, forsaken the high road, and entered the footpath which led up the vale to West Endelstow, he heard a little wicket click softly together some yards ahead. By the time that Stephen had reached the wicket and passed it, he heard another click of precisely the same nature from another gate yet further on. Clearly some person or persons were preceding him along the path, their footsteps being rendered noiseless by the soft carpet of turf. Stephen now walked a little quicker, and perceived two forms. One of them bore aloft the white feather he had noticed in the woman's hat on the quay: they were the couple he had seen in the boat. Stephen dropped a little further to the rear.

From the bottom of the valley, along which the path had hitherto lain, beside the margin of the trickling streamlet, another path now diverged, and ascended the slope of the left-hand hill. This footway led only to the residence of Mrs. Swancourt and a cottage or two in its vicinity. No grass covered this diverging path in portions of its length, and Stephen was reminded that the pair in front of him had taken this route by the occasional rattle of loose stones under their feet. Stephen climbed in the same direction, but for some undefined reason he trod more softly than did those preceding him. His mind was unconsciously in exercise upon whom the woman might be — whether a visitor to The Craggs, a servant, or Elfride. He put it to himself yet more

forcibly; could the lady be Elfride? A possible reason for her unaccountable failure to keep the appointment with him returned with painful force.

They entered the grounds of the house by the side wicket, whence the path, now wide and well trimmed, wound fantastically through the shrubbery to an octagonal pavilion called the Belvedere, by reason of the comprehensive view over the adjacent district that its green seats afforded. The path passed this erection and went on to the house as well as to the gardener's cottage on the other side, straggling thence to East Endelstow; so that Stephen felt no hesitation in entering a promenade which could scarcely be called private.

He fancied that he heard the gate open and swing together again behind him. Turning, he saw nobody.

The people of the boat came to the summer-house. One of them spoke.

'I am afraid we shall get a scolding for being so late.'

Stephen instantly recognised the familiar voice, richer and fuller now than it used to be. 'Elfride!' he whispered to himself, and held fast by a sapling, to steady himself under the agitation her presence caused him. His heart swerved from its beat; he shunned receiving the meaning he sought.

'A breeze is rising again; how the ash tree rustles!' said Elfride. 'Don't you hear it? I wonder what the time is.'

Stephen relinquished the sapling.

'I will get a light and tell you. Step into the summer-house; the air is quiet there.'

The cadence of that voice — its peculiarity seemed to come home to him like that of some notes of the northern birds on his return to his native clime, as an old natural thing renewed, yet not particularly noticed as natural before that renewal.

They entered the Belvedere. In the lower part it was formed of close wood-work nailed crosswise, and had openings in the upper by way of windows.

The scratch of a striking light was heard, and a bright glow radiated from the interior of the building. The light gave birth to dancing leaf-shadows, stem-shadows, lustrous streaks, dots, sparkles, and threads of silver sheen of all imaginable variety and transience. It awakened gnats, which flew towards it, revealed shiny gossamer threads, disturbed earthworms. Stephen gave but little attention to these phenomena, and less time. He saw in the summer-house a strongly illuminated picture.

First, the face of his friend and preceptor Henry Knight, between whom and himself an estrangement had arisen, not from any definite causes beyond those of absence, increasing age, and diverging sympathies.

Next, his bright particular star, Elfride. The face of Elfride was more womanly than when she had called herself his, but as clear and healthy as ever. Her plenteous twines of beautiful hair were looking much as usual, with the exception of a slight modification in their arrangement in deference to the changes of fashion.

Their two foreheads were close together, almost touching, and both were looking down. Elfride was holding her watch, Knight was holding the light with one hand, his

left arm being round her waist. Part of the scene reached Stephen's eyes through the horizontal bars of woodwork, which crossed their forms like the ribs of a skeleton.

Knight's arm stole still further round the waist of Elfride.

'It is half-past eight,' she said in a low voice, which had a peculiar music in it, seemingly born of a thrill of pleasure at the new proof that she was beloved.

The flame dwindled down, died away, and all was wrapped in a darkness to which the gloom before the illumination bore no comparison in apparent density. Stephen, shattered in spirit and sick to his heart's centre, turned away. In turning, he saw a shadowy outline behind the summer-house on the other side. His eyes grew accustomed to the darkness. Was the form a human form, or was it an opaque bush of juniper?

The lovers arose, brushed against the laurestines, and pursued their way to the house. The indistinct figure had moved, and now passed across Smith's front. So completely enveloped was the person, that it was impossible to discern him or her any more than as a shape. The shape glided noiselessly on.

Stephen stepped forward, fearing any mischief was intended to the other two. 'Who are you?' he said.

'Never mind who I am,' answered a weak whisper from the enveloping folds. 'WHAT I am, may she be! Perhaps I knew well — ah, so well! — a youth whose place you took, as he there now takes yours. Will you let her break your heart, and bring you to an untimely grave, as she did the one before you?'

'You are Mrs. Jethway, I think. What do you do here? And why do you talk so wildly?'

'Because my heart is desolate, and nobody cares about it. May hers be so that brought trouble upon me!'

'Silence!' said Stephen, staunch to Elfride in spite of himself. 'She would harm nobody wilfully, never would she! How do you come here?'

'I saw the two coming up the path, and wanted to learn if she were not one of them. Can I help disliking her if I think of the past? Can I help watching her if I remember my boy? Can I help ill-wishing her if I well-wish him?'

The bowed form went on, passed through the wicket, and was enveloped by the shadows of the field.

Stephen had heard that Mrs. Jethway, since the death of her son, had become a crazed, forlorn woman; and bestowing a pitying thought upon her, he dismissed her fancied wrongs from his mind, but not her condemnation of Elfride's faithlessness. That entered into and mingled with the sensations his new experience had begotten. The tale told by the little scene he had witnessed ran parallel with the unhappy woman's opinion, which, however baseless it might have been antecedently, had become true enough as regarded himself.

A slow weight of despair, as distinct from a violent paroxysm as starvation from a mortal shot, filled him and wrung him body and soul. The discovery had not been altogether unexpected, for throughout his anxiety of the last few days since the night in the churchyard, he had been inclined to construe the uncertainty unfavourably for

himself. His hopes for the best had been but periodic interruptions to a chronic fear of the worst.

A strange concomitant of his misery was the singularity of its form. That his rival should be Knight, whom once upon a time he had adored as a man is very rarely adored by another in modern times, and whom he loved now, added deprecation to sorrow, and cynicism to both. Henry Knight, whose praises he had so frequently trumpeted in her ears, of whom she had actually been jealous, lest she herself should be lessened in Stephen's love on account of him, had probably won her the more easily by reason of those very praises which he had only ceased to utter by her command. She had ruled him like a queen in that matter, as in all others. Stephen could tell by her manner, brief as had been his observation of it, and by her words, few as they were, that her position was far different with Knight. That she looked up at and adored her new lover from below his pedestal, was even more perceptible than that she had smiled down upon Stephen from a height above him.

The suddenness of Elfride's renunciation of himself was food for more torture. To an unimpassioned outsider, it admitted of at least two interpretations — it might either have proceeded from an endeavour to be faithful to her first choice, till the lover seen absolutely overpowered the lover remembered, or from a wish not to lose his love till sure of the love of another. But to Stephen Smith the motive involved in the latter alternative made it untenable where Elfride was the actor.

He mused on her letters to him, in which she had never mentioned a syllable concerning Knight. It is desirable, however, to observe that only in two letters could she possibly have done so. One was written about a week before Knight's arrival, when, though she did not mention his promised coming to Stephen, she had hardly a definite reason in her mind for neglecting to do it. In the next she did casually allude to Knight. But Stephen had left Bombay long before that letter arrived.

Stephen looked at the black form of the adjacent house, where it cut a dark polygonal notch out of the sky, and felt that he hated the spot. He did not know many facts of the case, but could not help instinctively associating Elfride's fickleness with the marriage of her father, and their introduction to London society. He closed the iron gate bounding the shrubbery as noiselessly as he had opened it, and went into the grassy field. Here he could see the old vicarage, the house alone that was associated with the sweet pleasant time of his incipient love for Elfride. Turning sadly from the place that was no longer a nook in which his thoughts might nestle when he was far away, he wandered in the direction of the east village, to reach his father's house before they retired to rest.

The nearest way to the cottage was by crossing the park. He did not hurry. Happiness frequently has reason for haste, but it is seldom that desolation need scramble or strain. Sometimes he paused under the low-hanging arms of the trees, looking vacantly on the ground.

Stephen was standing thus, scarcely less crippled in thought than he was blank in vision, when a clear sound permeated the quiet air about him, and spread on far

beyond. The sound was the stroke of a bell from the tower of East Endelstow Church, which stood in a dell not forty yards from Lord Luxellian's mansion, and within the park enclosure. Another stroke greeted his ear, and gave character to both: then came a slow succession of them.

'Somebody is dead,' he said aloud.

The death-knell of an inhabitant of the eastern parish was being tolled.

An unusual feature in the tolling was that it had not been begun according to the custom in Endelstow and other parishes in the neighbourhood. At every death the sex and age of the deceased were announced by a system of changes. Three times three strokes signified that the departed one was a man; three times two, a woman; twice three, a boy; twice two, a girl. The regular continuity of the tolling suggested that it was the resumption rather than the beginning of a knell — the opening portion of which Stephen had not been near enough to hear.

The momentary anxiety he had felt with regard to his parents passed away. He had left them in perfect health, and had any serious illness seized either, a communication would have reached him ere this. At the same time, since his way homeward lay under the churchyard yews, he resolved to look into the belfry in passing by, and speak a word to Martin Cannister, who would be there.

Stephen reached the brow of the hill, and felt inclined to renounce his idea. His mood was such that talking to any person to whom he could not unburden himself would be wearisome. However, before he could put any inclination into effect, the young man saw from amid the trees a bright light shining, the rays from which radiated like needles through the sad plummy foliage of the yews. Its direction was from the centre of the churchyard.

Stephen mechanically went forward. Never could there be a greater contrast between two places of like purpose than between this graveyard and that of the further village. Here the grass was carefully tended, and formed virtually a part of the manor-house lawn; flowers and shrubs being planted indiscriminately over both, whilst the few graves visible were mathematically exact in shape and smoothness, appearing in the daytime like chins newly shaven. There was no wall, the division between God's Acre and Lord Luxellian's being marked only by a few square stones set at equidistant points. Among those persons who have romantic sentiments on the subject of their last dwelling-place, probably the greater number would have chosen such a spot as this in preference to any other: a few would have fancied a constraint in its trim neatness, and would have preferred the wild hill-top of the neighbouring site, with Nature in her most negligent attire.

The light in the churchyard he next discovered to have its source in a point very near the ground, and Stephen imagined it might come from a lantern in the interior of a partly-dug grave. But a nearer approach showed him that its position was immediately under the wall of the aisle, and within the mouth of an archway. He could now hear voices, and the truth of the whole matter began to dawn upon him. Walking on towards the opening, Smith discerned on his left hand a heap of earth, and before him a flight

of stone steps which the removed earth had uncovered, leading down under the edifice. It was the entrance to a large family vault, extending under the north aisle.

Stephen had never before seen it open, and descending one or two steps stooped to look under the arch. The vault appeared to be crowded with coffins, with the exception of an open central space, which had been necessarily kept free for ingress and access to the sides, round three of which the coffins were stacked in stone bins or niches.

The place was well lighted with candles stuck in slips of wood that were fastened to the wall. On making the descent of another step the living inhabitants of the vault were recognizable. They were his father the master-mason, an under-mason, Martin Cannister, and two or three young and old labouring-men. Crowbars and workmen's hammers were scattered about. The whole company, sitting round on coffins which had been removed from their places, apparently for some alteration or enlargement of the vault, were eating bread and cheese, and drinking ale from a cup with two handles, passed round from each to each.

'Who is dead?' Stephen inquired, stepping down.

CHAPTER XXVI

'To that last nothing under earth.'

All eyes were turned to the entrance as Stephen spoke, and the ancient-mannered conclave scrutinized him inquiringly.

'Why, 'tis our Stephen!' said his father, rising from his seat; and, still retaining the frothy mug in his left hand, he swung forward his right for a grasp. 'Your mother is expecting ye — thought you would have come afore dark. But you'll wait and go home with me? I have all but done for the day, and was going directly.'

'Yes, 'tis Master Stephy, sure enough. Glad to see you so soon again, Master Smith,' said Martin Cannister, chastening the gladness expressed in his words by a strict neutrality of countenance, in order to harmonize the feeling as much as possible with the solemnity of a family vault.

'The same to you, Martin; and you, William,' said Stephen, nodding around to the rest, who, having their mouths full of bread and cheese, were of necessity compelled to reply merely by compressing their eyes to friendly lines and wrinkles.

'And who is dead?' Stephen repeated.

'Lady Luxellian, poor gentlewoman, as we all shall, said the under-mason. 'Ay, and we be going to enlarge the vault to make room for her.'

'When did she die?'

'Early this morning,' his father replied, with an appearance of recurring to a chronic thought. 'Yes, this morning. Martin hev been tolling ever since, almost. There, 'twas expected. She was very limber.'

‘Ay, poor soul, this morning,’ resumed the under-mason, a marvellously old man, whose skin seemed so much too large for his body that it would not stay in position. ‘She must know by this time whether she’s to go up or down, poor woman.’

‘What was her age?’

‘Not more than seven or eight and twenty by candlelight. But, Lord! by day ‘a was forty if ‘a were an hour.’

‘Ay, night-time or day-time makes a difference of twenty years to rich feymels,’ observed Martin.

‘She was one and thirty really,’ said John Smith. ‘I had it from them that know.’

‘Not more than that!’

‘A looked very bad, poor lady. In faith, ye might say she was dead for years afore ‘a would own it.’

‘As my old father used to say, “dead, but wouldn’t drop down.”’

‘I seed her, poor soul,’ said a labourer from behind some removed coffins, ‘only but last Valentine’s-day of all the world. ‘A was arm in crook wi’ my lord. I says to myself, “You be ticketed Churchyard, my noble lady, although you don’t dream on’t.”’

‘I suppose my lord will write to all the other lords anointed in the nation, to let ‘em know that she that was is now no more?’

‘‘Tis done and past. I see a bundle of letters go off an hour after the death. Sich wonderful black rims as they letters had — half-an-inch wide, at the very least.’

‘Too much,’ observed Martin. ‘In short, ‘tis out of the question that a human being can be so mournful as black edges half-an-inch wide. I’m sure people don’t feel more than a very narrow border when they feels most of all.’

‘And there are two little girls, are there not?’ said Stephen.

‘Nice clane little faces! — left motherless now.’

‘They used to come to Parson Swancourt’s to play with Miss Elfride when I were there,’ said William Worm. ‘Ah, they did so’s!’ The latter sentence was introduced to add the necessary melancholy to a remark which, intrinsically, could hardly be made to possess enough for the occasion. ‘Yes,’ continued Worm, ‘they’d run upstairs, they’d run down; flitting about with her everywhere. Very fond of her, they were. Ah, well!’

‘Fonder than ever they were of their mother, so ‘tis said here and there,’ added a labourer.

‘Well, you see, ‘tis natural. Lady Luxellian stood aloof from ‘em so — was so drowsy-like, that they couldn’t love her in the jolly-companion way children want to like folks. Only last winter I seed Miss Elfride talking to my lady and the two children, and Miss Elfride wiped their noses for em’ SO careful — my lady never once seeing that it wanted doing; and, naturally, children take to people that’s their best friend.’

‘Be as ‘twill, the woman is dead and gone, and we must make a place for her,’ said John. ‘Come, lads, drink up your ale, and we’ll just rid this corner, so as to have all clear for beginning at the wall, as soon as ‘tis light to-morrow.’

Stephen then asked where Lady Luxellian was to lie.

‘Here,’ said his father. ‘We are going to set back this wall and make a recess; and ‘tis enough for us to do before the funeral. When my lord’s mother died, she said, “John, the place must be enlarged before another can be put in.” But ‘a never expected ‘twould be wanted so soon. Better move Lord George first, I suppose, Simeon?’

He pointed with his foot to a heavy coffin, covered with what had originally been red velvet, the colour of which could only just be distinguished now.

‘Just as ye think best, Master John,’ replied the shrivelled mason. ‘Ah, poor Lord George!’ he continued, looking contemplatively at the huge coffin; ‘he and I were as bitter enemies once as any could be when one is a lord and t’other only a mortal man. Poor fellow! He’d clap his hand upon my shoulder and cuss me as familial and neighbourly as if he’d been a common chap. Ay, ‘a cussed me up hill and ‘a cussed me down; and then ‘a would rave out again, and the goold clamps of his fine new teeth would glisten in the sun like fetters of brass, while I, being a small man and poor, was fain to say nothing at all. Such a strappen fine gentleman as he was too! Yes, I rather liked en sometimes. But once now and then, when I looked at his towering height, I’d think in my inside, “What a weight you’ll be, my lord, for our arms to lower under the aisle of Endelstow Church some day!”’

‘And was he?’ inquired a young labourer.

‘He was. He was five hundredweight if ‘a were a pound. What with his lead, and his oak, and his handles, and his one thing and t’other’ — here the ancient man slapped his hand upon the cover with a force that caused a rattle among the bones inside — ‘he half broke my back when I took his feet to lower en down the steps there. “Ah,” saith I to John there — didn’t I, John? — ”that ever one man’s glory should be such a weight upon another man!” But there, I liked my lord George sometimes.’

‘‘Tis a strange thought,’ said another, ‘that while they be all here under one roof, a snug united family o’ Luxellians, they be really scattered miles away from one another in the form of good sheep and wicked goats, isn’t it?’

‘True; ‘tis a thought to look at.’

‘And that one, if he’s gone upward, don’t know what his wife is doing no more than the man in the moon if she’s gone downward. And that some unfortunate one in the hot place is a-hollering across to a lucky one up in the clouds, and quite forgetting their bodies be boxed close together all the time.’

‘Ay, ‘tis a thought to look at, too, that I can say “Hullo!” close to fiery Lord George, and ‘a can’t hear me.’

‘And that I be eating my onion close to dainty Lady Jane’s nose, and she can’t smell me.’

‘What do ‘em put all their heads one way for?’ inquired a young man.

‘Because ‘tis churchyard law, you simple. The law of the living is, that a man shall be upright and down-right, and the law of the dead is, that a man shall be east and west. Every state of society have its laws.’

‘We must break the law wi’ a few of the poor souls, however. Come, buckle to,’ said the master-mason.

And they set to work anew.

The order of interment could be distinctly traced by observing the appearance of the coffins as they lay piled around. On those which had been standing there but a generation or two the trappings still remained. Those of an earlier period showed bare wood, with a few tattered rags dangling therefrom. Earlier still, the wood lay in fragments on the floor of the niche, and the coffin consisted of naked lead alone; whilst in the case of the very oldest, even the lead was bulging and cracking in pieces, revealing to the curious eye a heap of dust within. The shields upon many were quite loose, and removable by the hand, their lustreless surfaces still indistinctly exhibiting the name and title of the deceased.

Overhead the groins and concavities of the arches curved in all directions, dropping low towards the walls, where the height was no more than sufficient to enable a person to stand upright.

The body of George the fourteenth baron, together with two or three others, all of more recent date than the great bulk of coffins piled there, had, for want of room, been placed at the end of the vault on tressels, and not in niches like the others. These it was necessary to remove, to form behind them the chamber in which they were ultimately to be deposited. Stephen, finding the place and proceedings in keeping with the sombre colours of his mind, waited there still.

‘Simeon, I suppose you can mind poor Lady Elfride, and how she ran away with the actor?’ said John Smith, after awhile. ‘I think it fell upon the time my father was sexton here. Let us see — where is she?’

‘Here somewhere,’ returned Simeon, looking round him.

‘Why, I’ve got my arms round the very gentlewoman at this moment.’ He lowered the end of the coffin he was holding, wiped his face, and throwing a morsel of rotten wood upon another as an indicator, continued: ‘That’s her husband there. They was as fair a couple as you should see anywhere round about; and a good-hearted pair likewise. Ay, I can mind it, though I was but a chiel at the time. She fell in love with this young man of hers, and their banns were asked in some church in London; and the old lord her father actually heard ‘em asked the three times, and didn’t notice her name, being gabbled on wi’ a host of others. When she had married she told her father, and ‘a fled into a monstrous rage, and said she shouldn’ hae a farthing. Lady Elfride said she didn’t think of wishing it; if he’d forgie her ‘twas all she asked, and as for a living, she was content to play plays with her husband. This frightened the old lord, and ‘a gie’d ‘em a house to live in, and a great garden, and a little field or two, and a carriage, and a good few guineas. Well, the poor thing died at her first gossiping, and her husband — who was as tender-hearted a man as ever eat meat, and would have died for her — went wild in his mind, and broke his heart (so ‘twas said). Anyhow, they were buried the same day — father and mother — but the baby lived. Ay, my lord’s family made much of that man then, and put him here with his wife, and there in the corner the man is now. The Sunday after there was a funeral sermon: the text was, “Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken;” and when ‘twas

preaching the men drew their hands across their eyes several times, and every woman cried out loud.'

'And what became of the baby?' said Stephen, who had frequently heard portions of the story.

'She was brought up by her grandmother, and a pretty maid she were. And she must needs run away with the curate — Parson Swancourt that is now. Then her grandmother died, and the title and everything went away to another branch of the family altogether. Parson Swancourt wasted a good deal of his wife's money, and she left him Miss Elfride. That trick of running away seems to be handed down in families, like craziness or gout. And they two women be alike as peas.'

'Which two?'

'Lady Elfride and young Miss that's alive now. The same hair and eyes: but Miss Elfride's mother was darker a good deal.'

'Life's a strangle bubble, ye see,' said William Worm musingly. 'For if the Lord's anointment had descended upon women instead of men, Miss Elfride would be Lord Luxellian — Lady, I mane. But as it is, the blood is run out, and she's nothing to the Luxellian family by law, whatever she may be by gospel.'

'I used to fancy,' said Simeon, 'when I seed Miss Elfride hugging the little ladyships, that there was a likeness; but I suppose 'twas only my dream, for years must have altered the old family shape.'

'And now we'll move these two, and home-along,' interposed John Smith, reviving, as became a master, the spirit of labour, which had showed unmistakable signs of being nearly vanquished by the spirit of chat, 'The flagon of ale we don't want we'll let bide here till to-morrow; none of the poor souls will touch it 'a b'lieve.'

So the evening's work was concluded, and the party drew from the abode of the quiet dead, closing the old iron door, and shooting the lock loudly into the huge copper staple — an incongruous act of imprisonment towards those who had no dreams of escape.

CHAPTER XXVII

'How should I greet thee?'

Love frequently dies of time alone — much more frequently of displacement. With Elfride Swancourt, a powerful reason why the displacement should be successful was that the new-comer was a greater man than the first. By the side of the instructive and piquant snubbings she received from Knight, Stephen's general agreeableness seemed watery; by the side of Knight's spare love-making, Stephen's continual outflow seemed lackadaisical. She had begun to sigh for somebody further on in manhood. Stephen was hardly enough of a man.

Perhaps there was a proneness to inconstancy in her nature — a nature, to those who contemplate it from a standpoint beyond the influence of that inconstancy, the most

exquisite of all in its plasticity and ready sympathies. Partly, too, Stephen's failure to make his hold on her heart a permanent one was his too timid habit of dispraising himself beside her — a peculiarity which, exercised towards sensible men, stirs a kindly chord of attachment that a marked assertiveness would leave untouched, but inevitably leads the most sensible woman in the world to undervalue him who practises it. Directly domineering ceases in the man, snubbing begins in the woman; the trite but no less unfortunate fact being that the gentler creature rarely has the capacity to appreciate fair treatment from her natural complement. The abiding perception of the position of Stephen's parents had, of course, a little to do with Elfride's renunciation. To such girls poverty may not be, as to the more worldly masses of humanity, a sin in itself; but it is a sin, because graceful and dainty manners seldom exist in such an atmosphere. Few women of old family can be thoroughly taught that a fine soul may wear a smock-frock, and an admittedly common man in one is but a worm in their eyes. John Smith's rough hands and clothes, his wife's dialect, the necessary narrowness of their ways, being constantly under Elfride's notice, were not without their deflecting influence.

On reaching home after the perilous adventure by the sea-shore, Knight had felt unwell, and retired almost immediately. The young lady who had so materially assisted him had done the same, but she reappeared, properly clothed, about five o'clock. She wandered restlessly about the house, but not on account of their joint narrow escape from death. The storm which had torn the tree had merely bowed the reed, and with the deliverance of Knight all deep thought of the accident had left her. The mutual avowal which it had been the means of precipitating occupied a far longer length of her meditations.

Elfride's disquiet now was on account of that miserable promise to meet Stephen, which returned like a spectre again and again. The perception of his littleness beside Knight grew upon her alarmingly. She now thought how sound had been her father's advice to her to give him up, and was as passionately desirous of following it as she had hitherto been averse. Perhaps there is nothing more hardening to the tone of young minds than thus to discover how their dearest and strongest wishes become gradually attuned by Time the Cynic to the very note of some selfish policy which in earlier days they despised.

The hour of appointment came, and with it a crisis; and with the crisis a collapse.

'God forgive me — I can't meet Stephen!' she exclaimed to herself. 'I don't love him less, but I love Mr. Knight more!'

Yes: she would save herself from a man not fit for her — in spite of vows. She would obey her father, and have no more to do with Stephen Smith. Thus the fickle resolve showed signs of assuming the complexion of a virtue.

The following days were passed without any definite avowal from Knight's lips. Such solitary walks and scenes as that witnessed by Smith in the summer-house were frequent, but he courted her so intangibly that to any but such a delicate perception as Elfride's it would have appeared no courtship at all. The time now really began to be sweet with her. She dismissed the sense of sin in her past actions, and was automatic

in the intoxication of the moment. The fact that Knight made no actual declaration was no drawback. Knowing since the betrayal of his sentiments that love for her really existed, she preferred it for the present in its form of essence, and was willing to avoid for awhile the grosser medium of words. Their feelings having been forced to a rather premature demonstration, a reaction was indulged in by both.

But no sooner had she got rid of her troubled conscience on the matter of faithlessness than a new anxiety confronted her. It was lest Knight should accidentally meet Stephen in the parish, and that herself should be the subject of discourse.

Elfride, learning Knight more thoroughly, perceived that, far from having a notion of Stephen's precedence, he had no idea that she had ever been wooed before by anybody. On ordinary occasions she had a tongue so frank as to show her whole mind, and a mind so straightforward as to reveal her heart to its innermost shrine. But the time for a change had come. She never alluded to even a knowledge of Knight's friend. When women are secret they are secret indeed; and more often than not they only begin to be secret with the advent of a second lover.

The elopement was now a spectre worse than the first, and, like the Spirit in Glenfinlas, it waxed taller with every attempt to lay it. Her natural honesty invited her to confide in Knight, and trust to his generosity for forgiveness: she knew also that as mere policy it would be better to tell him early if he was to be told at all. The longer her concealment the more difficult would be the revelation. But she put it off. The intense fear which accompanies intense love in young women was too strong to allow the exercise of a moral quality antagonistic to itself:

'Where love is great, the littlest doubts are fear;

Where little fears grow great, great love grows there.'

The match was looked upon as made by her father and mother. The vicar remembered her promise to reveal the meaning of the telegram she had received, and two days after the scene in the summer-house, asked her pointedly. She was frank with him now.

'I had been corresponding with Stephen Smith ever since he left England, till lately,' she calmly said.

'What!' cried the vicar aghast; 'under the eyes of Mr. Knight, too?'

'No; when I found I cared most for Mr. Knight, I obeyed you.'

'You were very kind, I'm sure. When did you begin to like Mr. Knight?'

'I don't see that that is a pertinent question, papa; the telegram was from the shipping agent, and was not sent at my request. It announced the arrival of the vessel bringing him home.'

'Home! What, is he here?'

'Yes; in the village, I believe.'

'Has he tried to see you?'

'Only by fair means. But don't, papa, question me so! It is torture.'

'I will only say one word more,' he replied. 'Have you met him?'

‘I have not. I can assure you that at the present moment there is no more of an understanding between me and the young man you so much disliked than between him and you. You told me to forget him; and I have forgotten him.’

‘Oh, well; though you did not obey me in the beginning, you are a good girl, Elfride, in obeying me at last.’

‘Don’t call me “good,” papa,’ she said bitterly; ‘you don’t know — and the less said about some things the better. Remember, Mr. Knight knows nothing about the other. Oh, how wrong it all is! I don’t know what I am coming to.’

‘As matters stand, I should be inclined to tell him; or, at any rate, I should not alarm myself about his knowing. He found out the other day that this was the parish young Smith’s father lives in — what puts you in such a flurry?’

‘I can’t say; but promise — pray don’t let him know! It would be my ruin!’

‘Pooh, child. Knight is a good fellow and a clever man; but at the same time it does not escape my perceptions that he is no great catch for you. Men of his turn of mind are nothing so wonderful in the way of husbands. If you had chosen to wait, you might have mated with a much wealthier man. But remember, I have not a word to say against your having him, if you like him. Charlotte is delighted, as you know.’

‘Well, papa,’ she said, smiling hopefully through a sigh, ‘it is nice to feel that in giving way to — to caring for him, I have pleased my family. But I am not good; oh no, I am very far from that!’

‘None of us are good, I am sorry to say,’ said her father blandly; ‘but girls have a chartered right to change their minds, you know. It has been recognized by poets from time immemorial. Catullus says, “Mulier cupido quod dicit amanti, in vento — ” What a memory mine is! However, the passage is, that a woman’s words to a lover are as a matter of course written only on wind and water. Now don’t be troubled about that, Elfride.’

‘Ah, you don’t know!’

They had been standing on the lawn, and Knight was now seen lingering some way down a winding walk. When Elfride met him, it was with a much greater lightness of heart; things were more straightforward now. The responsibility of her fickleness seemed partly shifted from her own shoulders to her father’s. Still, there were shadows.

‘Ah, could he have known how far I went with Stephen, and yet have said the same, how much happier I should be!’ That was her prevailing thought.

In the afternoon the lovers went out together on horseback for an hour or two; and though not wishing to be observed, by reason of the late death of Lady Luxellian, whose funeral had taken place very privately on the previous day, they yet found it necessary to pass East Endelstow Church.

The steps to the vault, as has been stated, were on the outside of the building, immediately under the aisle wall. Being on horseback, both Knight and Elfride could overlook the shrubs which screened the church-yard.

‘Look, the vault seems still to be open,’ said Knight.

‘Yes, it is open,’ she answered

‘Who is that man close by it? The mason, I suppose?’

‘Yes.’

‘I wonder if it is John Smith, Stephen’s father?’

‘I believe it is,’ said Elfride, with apprehension.

‘Ah, and can it be? I should like to inquire how his son, my truant protege’, is going on. And from your father’s description of the vault, the interior must be interesting. Suppose we go in.’

‘Had we better, do you think? May not Lord Luxellian be there?’

‘It is not at all likely.’

Elfride then assented, since she could do nothing else. Her heart, which at first had quailed in consternation, recovered itself when she considered the character of John Smith. A quiet unassuming man, he would be sure to act towards her as before those love passages with his son, which might have given a more pretentious mechanic airs. So without much alarm she took Knight’s arm after dismounting, and went with him between and over the graves. The master-mason recognized her as she approached, and, as usual, lifted his hat respectfully.

‘I know you to be Mr. Smith, my former friend Stephen’s father,’ said Knight, directly he had scanned the embrowned and ruddy features of John.

‘Yes, sir, I b’lieve I be.’

‘How is your son now? I have only once heard from him since he went to India. I daresay you have heard him speak of me — Mr. Knight, who became acquainted with him some years ago in Exonbury.’

‘Ay, that I have. Stephen is very well, thank you, sir, and he’s in England; in fact, he’s at home. In short, sir, he’s down in the vault there, a-looking at the departed coffins.’

Elfride’s heart fluttered like a butterfly.

Knight looked amazed. ‘Well, that is extraordinary.’ he murmured. ‘Did he know I was in the parish?’

‘I really can’t say, sir,’ said John, wishing himself out of the entanglement he rather suspected than thoroughly understood.

‘Would it be considered an intrusion by the family if we went into the vault?’

‘Oh, bless ye, no, sir; scores of folk have been stepping down. ‘Tis left open a-purpose.’

‘We will go down, Elfride.’

‘I am afraid the air is close,’ she said appealingly.

‘Oh no, ma’am,’ said John. ‘We white-limed the walls and arches the day ‘twas opened, as we always do, and again on the morning of the funeral; the place is as sweet as a granary.’

‘Then I should like you to accompany me, Elfie; having originally sprung from the family too.’

‘I don’t like going where death is so emphatically present. I’ll stay by the horses whilst you go in; they may get loose.’

‘What nonsense! I had no idea your sentiments were so flimsily formed as to be perturbed by a few remnants of mortality; but stay out, if you are so afraid, by all means.’

‘Oh no, I am not afraid; don’t say that.’

She held miserably to his arm, thinking that, perhaps, the revelation might as well come at once as ten minutes later, for Stephen would be sure to accompany his friend to his horse.

At first, the gloom of the vault, which was lighted only by a couple of candles, was too great to admit of their seeing anything distinctly; but with a further advance Knight discerned, in front of the black masses lining the walls, a young man standing, and writing in a pocket-book.

Knight said one word: ‘Stephen!’

Stephen Smith, not being in such absolute ignorance of Knight’s whereabouts as Knight had been of Smith’s instantly recognized his friend, and knew by rote the outlines of the fair woman standing behind him.

Stephen came forward and shook him by the hand, without speaking.

‘Why have you not written, my boy?’ said Knight, without in any way signifying Elfride’s presence to Stephen. To the essayist, Smith was still the country lad whom he had patronized and tended; one to whom the formal presentation of a lady betrothed to himself would have seemed incongruous and absurd.

‘Why haven’t you written to me?’ said Stephen.

‘Ah, yes. Why haven’t I? why haven’t we? That’s always the query which we cannot clearly answer without an unsatisfactory sense of our inadequacies. However, I have not forgotten you, Smith. And now we have met; and we must meet again, and have a longer chat than this can conveniently be. I must know all you have been doing. That you have thriven, I know, and you must teach me the way.’

Elfride stood in the background. Stephen had read the position at a glance, and immediately guessed that she had never mentioned his name to Knight. His tact in avoiding catastrophes was the chief quality which made him intellectually respectable, in which quality he far transcended Knight; and he decided that a tranquil issue out of the encounter, without any harrowing of the feelings of either Knight or Elfride, was to be attempted if possible. His old sense of indebtedness to Knight had never wholly forsaken him; his love for Elfride was generous now.

As far as he dared look at her movements he saw that her bearing towards him would be dictated by his own towards her; and if he acted as a stranger she would do likewise as a means of deliverance. Circumstances favouring this course, it was desirable also to be rather reserved towards Knight, to shorten the meeting as much as possible.

‘I am afraid that my time is almost too short to allow even of such a pleasure,’ he said. ‘I leave here to-morrow. And until I start for the Continent and India, which will be in a fortnight, I shall have hardly a moment to spare.’

Knight's disappointment and dissatisfied looks at this reply sent a pang through Stephen as great as any he had felt at the sight of Elfride. The words about shortness of time were literally true, but their tone was far from being so. He would have been gratified to talk with Knight as in past times, and saw as a dead loss to himself that, to save the woman who cared nothing for him, he was deliberately throwing away his friend.

'Oh, I am sorry to hear that,' said Knight, in a changed tone. 'But of course, if you have weighty concerns to attend to, they must not be neglected. And if this is to be our first and last meeting, let me say that I wish you success with all my heart!' Knight's warmth revived towards the end; the solemn impressions he was beginning to receive from the scene around them abstracting from his heart as a puerility any momentary vexation at words. 'It is a strange place for us to meet in,' he continued, looking round the vault.

Stephen briefly assented, and there was a silence. The blackened coffins were now revealed more clearly than at first, the whitened walls and arches throwing them forward in strong relief. It was a scene which was remembered by all three as an indelible mark in their history. Knight, with an abstracted face, was standing between his companions, though a little in advance of them, Elfride being on his right hand, and Stephen Smith on his left. The white daylight on his right side gleamed faintly in, and was toned to a blueness by contrast with the yellow rays from the candle against the wall. Elfride, timidly shrinking back, and nearest the entrance, received most of the light therefrom, whilst Stephen was entirely in candlelight, and to him the spot of outer sky visible above the steps was as a steely blue patch, and nothing more.

'I have been here two or three times since it was opened,' said Stephen. 'My father was engaged in the work, you know.'

'Yes. What are you doing?' Knight inquired, looking at the note-book and pencil Stephen held in his hand.

'I have been sketching a few details in the church, and since then I have been copying the names from some of the coffins here. Before I left England I used to do a good deal of this sort of thing.'

'Yes; of course. Ah, that's poor Lady Luxellian, I suppose.' Knight pointed to a coffin of light satin-wood, which stood on the stone sleepers in the new niche. 'And the remainder of the family are on this side. Who are those two, so snug and close together?'

Stephen's voice altered slightly as he replied 'That's Lady Elfride Kingsmore — born Luxellian, and that is Arthur, her husband. I have heard my father say that they — he — ran away with her, and married her against the wish of her parents.'

'Then I imagine this to be where you got your Christian name, Miss Swancourt?' said Knight, turning to her. 'I think you told me it was three or four generations ago that your family branched off from the Luxellians?'

'She was my grandmother,' said Elfride, vainly endeavouring to moisten her dry lips before she spoke. Elfride had then the conscience-stricken look of Guido's Magdalen,

rendered upon a more childlike form. She kept her face partially away from Knight and Stephen, and set her eyes upon the sky visible outside, as if her salvation depended upon quickly reaching it. Her left hand rested lightly within Knight's arm, half withdrawn, from a sense of shame at claiming him before her old lover, yet unwilling to renounce him; so that her glove merely touched his sleeve. "Can one be pardoned, and retain the offence?" quoted Elfride's heart then.

Conversation seemed to have no self-sustaining power, and went on in the shape of disjointed remarks. 'One's mind gets thronged with thoughts while standing so solemnly here,' Knight said, in a measured quiet voice. 'How much has been said on death from time to time! how much we ourselves can think upon it! We may fancy each of these who lie here saying:

'For Thou, to make my fall more great,
Didst lift me up on high.'

What comes next, Elfride? It is the Hundred-and-second Psalm I am thinking of.'

'Yes, I know it,' she murmured, and went on in a still lower voice, seemingly afraid for any words from the emotional side of her nature to reach Stephen:

"My days, just hastening to their end,
Are like an evening shade;
My beauty doth, like wither'd grass,
With waning lustre fade."

'Well,' said Knight musingly, 'let us leave them. Such occasions as these seem to compel us to roam outside ourselves, far away from the fragile frame we live in, and to expand till our perception grows so vast that our physical reality bears no sort of proportion to it. We look back upon the weak and minute stem on which this luxuriant growth depends, and ask, Can it be possible that such a capacity has a foundation so small? Must I again return to my daily walk in that narrow cell, a human body, where worldly thoughts can torture me? Do we not?'

'Yes,' said Stephen and Elfride.

'One has a sense of wrong, too, that such an appreciative breadth as a sentient being possesses should be committed to the frail casket of a body. What weakens one's intentions regarding the future like the thought of this?...However, let us tune ourselves to a more cheerful chord, for there's a great deal to be done yet by us all.'

As Knight meditatively addressed his juniors thus, unconscious of the deception practised, for different reasons, by the severed hearts at his side, and of the scenes that had in earlier days united them, each one felt that he and she did not gain by contrast with their musing mentor. Physically not so handsome as either the youthful architect or the vicar's daughter, the thoroughness and integrity of Knight illuminated his features with a dignity not even incipient in the other two. It is difficult to frame rules which shall apply to both sexes, and Elfride, an undeveloped girl, must, perhaps, hardly be laden with the moral responsibilities which attach to a man in like circumstances. The charm of woman, too, lies partly in her subtleness in matters of love. But if honesty is a virtue in itself, Elfride, having none of it now, seemed, being for being,

scarcely good enough for Knight. Stephen, though deceptive for no unworthy purpose, was deceptive after all; and whatever good results grace such strategy if it succeed, it seldom draws admiration, especially when it fails.

On an ordinary occasion, had Knight been even quite alone with Stephen, he would hardly have alluded to his possible relationship to Elfride. But moved by attendant circumstances Knight was impelled to be confiding.

‘Stephen,’ he said, ‘this lady is Miss Swancourt. I am staying at her father’s house, as you probably know.’ He stepped a few paces nearer to Smith, and said in a lower tone: ‘I may as well tell you that we are engaged to be married.’

Low as the words had been spoken, Elfride had heard them, and awaited Stephen’s reply in breathless silence, if that could be called silence where Elfride’s dress, at each throb of her heart, shook and indicated it like a pulse-glass, rustling also against the wall in reply to the same throbbing. The ray of daylight which reached her face lent it a blue pallor in comparison with those of the other two.

‘I congratulate you,’ Stephen whispered; and said aloud, ‘I know Miss Swancourt — a little. You must remember that my father is a parishioner of Mr. Swancourt’s.’

‘I thought you might possibly not have lived at home since they have been here.’

‘I have never lived at home, certainly, since that time.’

‘I have seen Mr. Smith,’ faltered Elfride.

‘Well, there is no excuse for me. As strangers to each other I ought, I suppose, to have introduced you: as acquaintances, I should not have stood so persistently between you. But the fact is, Smith, you seem a boy to me, even now.’

Stephen appeared to have a more than previous consciousness of the intense cruelty of his fate at the present moment. He could not repress the words, uttered with a dim bitterness:

‘You should have said that I seemed still the rural mechanic’s son I am, and hence an unfit subject for the ceremony of introductions.’

‘Oh, no, no! I won’t have that.’ Knight endeavoured to give his reply a laughing tone in Elfride’s ears, and an earnestness in Stephen’s: in both which efforts he signally failed, and produced a forced speech pleasant to neither. ‘Well, let us go into the open air again; Miss Swancourt, you are particularly silent. You mustn’t mind Smith. I have known him for years, as I have told you.’

‘Yes, you have,’ she said.

‘To think she has never mentioned her knowledge of me!’ Smith murmured, and thought with some remorse how much her conduct resembled his own on his first arrival at her house as a stranger to the place.

They ascended to the daylight, Knight taking no further notice of Elfride’s manner, which, as usual, he attributed to the natural shyness of a young woman at being discovered walking with him on terms which left not much doubt of their meaning. Elfride stepped a little in advance, and passed through the churchyard.

‘You are changed very considerably, Smith,’ said Knight, ‘and I suppose it is no more than was to be expected. However, don’t imagine that I shall feel any the less

interest in you and your fortunes whenever you care to confide them to me. I have not forgotten the attachment you spoke of as your reason for going away to India. A London young lady, was it not? I hope all is prosperous?’

‘No: the match is broken off.’

It being always difficult to know whether to express sorrow or gladness under such circumstances — all depending upon the character of the match — Knight took shelter in the safe words: ‘I trust it was for the best.’

‘I hope it was. But I beg that you will not press me further: no, you have not pressed me — I don’t mean that — but I would rather not speak upon the subject.’

Stephen’s words were hurried.

Knight said no more, and they followed in the footsteps of Elfride, who still kept some paces in advance, and had not heard Knight’s unconscious allusion to her. Stephen bade him adieu at the churchyard-gate without going outside, and watched whilst he and his sweetheart mounted their horses.

‘Good heavens, Elfride,’ Knight exclaimed, ‘how pale you are! I suppose I ought not to have taken you into that vault. What is the matter?’

‘Nothing,’ said Elfride faintly. ‘I shall be myself in a moment. All was so strange and unexpected down there, that it made me unwell.’

‘I thought you said very little. Shall I get some water?’

‘No, no.’

‘Do you think it is safe for you to mount?’

‘Quite — indeed it is,’ she said, with a look of appeal.

‘Now then — up she goes!’ whispered Knight, and lifted her tenderly into the saddle.

Her old lover still looked on at the performance as he leant over the gate a dozen yards off. Once in the saddle, and having a firm grip of the reins, she turned her head as if by a resistless fascination, and for the first time since that memorable parting on the moor outside St. Launce’s after the passionate attempt at marriage with him, Elfride looked in the face of the young man she first had loved. He was the youth who had called her his inseparable wife many a time, and whom she had even addressed as her husband. Their eyes met. Measurement of life should be proportioned rather to the intensity of the experience than to its actual length. Their glance, but a moment chronologically, was a season in their history. To Elfride the intense agony of reproach in Stephen’s eye was a nail piercing her heart with a deadliness no words can describe. With a spasmodic effort she withdrew her eyes, urged on the horse, and in the chaos of perturbed memories was oblivious of any presence beside her. The deed of deception was complete.

Gaining a knoll on which the park transformed itself into wood and copse, Knight came still closer to her side, and said, ‘Are you better now, dearest?’

‘Oh yes.’ She pressed a hand to her eyes, as if to blot out the image of Stephen. A vivid scarlet spot now shone with preternatural brightness in the centre of each cheek, leaving the remainder of her face lily-white as before.

‘Elfride,’ said Knight, rather in his old tone of mentor, ‘you know I don’t for a moment chide you, but is there not a great deal of unwomanly weakness in your allowing yourself to be so overwhelmed by the sight of what, after all, is no novelty? Every woman worthy of the name should, I think, be able to look upon death with something like composure. Surely you think so too?’

‘Yes; I own it.’

His obtuseness to the cause of her indisposition, by evidencing his entire freedom from the suspicion of anything behind the scenes, showed how incapable Knight was of deception himself, rather than any inherent dulness in him regarding human nature. This, clearly perceived by Elfride, added poignancy to her self-reproach, and she idolized him the more because of their difference. Even the recent sight of Stephen’s face and the sound of his voice, which for a moment had stirred a chord or two of ancient kindness, were unable to keep down the adoration re-existent now that he was again out of view.

She had replied to Knight’s question hastily, and immediately went on to speak of indifferent subjects. After they had reached home she was apart from him till dinner-time. When dinner was over, and they were watching the dusk in the drawing-room, Knight stepped out upon the terrace. Elfride went after him very decisively, on the spur of a virtuous intention.

‘Mr. Knight, I want to tell you something,’ she said, with quiet firmness.

‘And what is it about?’ gaily returned her lover. ‘Happiness, I hope. Do not let anything keep you so sad as you seem to have been to-day.’

‘I cannot mention the matter until I tell you the whole substance of it,’ she said. ‘And that I will do to-morrow. I have been reminded of it to-day. It is about something I once did, and don’t think I ought to have done.’

This, it must be said, was rather a mild way of referring to a frantic passion and flight, which, much or little in itself, only accident had saved from being a scandal in the public eye.

Knight thought the matter some trifle, and said pleasantly:

‘Then I am not to hear the dreadful confession now?’

‘No, not now. I did not mean to-night,’ Elfride responded, with a slight decline in the firmness of her voice. ‘It is not light as you think it — it troubles me a great deal.’ Fearing now the effect of her own earnestness, she added forcedly, ‘Though, perhaps, you may think it light after all.’

‘But you have not said when it is to be?’

‘To-morrow morning. Name a time, will you, and bind me to it? I want you to fix an hour, because I am weak, and may otherwise try to get out of it.’ She added a little artificial laugh, which showed how timorous her resolution was still.

‘Well, say after breakfast — at eleven o’clock.’

‘Yes, eleven o’clock. I promise you. Bind me strictly to my word.’

CHAPTER XXVIII

‘I lull a fancy, trouble-tost.’

Miss Swancourt, it is eleven o’clock.’

She was looking out of her dressing-room window on the first floor, and Knight was regarding her from the terrace balustrade, upon which he had been idly sitting for some time — dividing the glances of his eye between the pages of a book in his hand, the brilliant hues of the geraniums and calceolarias, and the open window above-mentioned.

‘Yes, it is, I know. I am coming.’

He drew closer, and under the window.

‘How are you this morning, Elfride? You look no better for your long night’s rest.’

She appeared at the door shortly after, took his offered arm, and together they walked slowly down the gravel path leading to the river and away under the trees.

Her resolution, sustained during the last fifteen hours, had been to tell the whole truth, and now the moment had come.

Step by step they advanced, and still she did not speak. They were nearly at the end of the walk, when Knight broke the silence.

‘Well, what is the confession, Elfride?’

She paused a moment, drew a long breath; and this is what she said:

‘I told you one day — or rather I gave you to understand — what was not true. I fancy you thought me to mean I was nineteen my next birthday, but it was my last I was nineteen.’

The moment had been too much for her. Now that the crisis had come, no qualms of conscience, no love of honesty, no yearning to make a confidence and obtain forgiveness with a kiss, could string Elfride up to the venture. Her dread lest he should be unforgiving was heightened by the thought of yesterday’s artifice, which might possibly add disgust to his disappointment. The certainty of one more day’s affection, which she gained by silence, outvalued the hope of a perpetuity combined with the risk of all.

The trepidation caused by these thoughts on what she had intended to say shook so naturally the words she did say, that Knight never for a moment suspected them to be a last moment’s substitution. He smiled and pressed her hand warmly.

‘My dear Elfie — yes, you are now — no protestation — what a winning little woman you are, to be so absurdly scrupulous about a mere iota! Really, I never once have thought whether your nineteenth year was the last or the present. And, by George, well I may not; for it would never do for a staid fogey a dozen years older to stand upon such a trifle as that.’

‘Don’t praise me — don’t praise me! Though I prize it from your lips, I don’t deserve it now.’

But Knight, being in an exceptionally genial mood, merely saw this distressful exclamation as modesty. ‘Well,’ he added, after a minute, ‘I like you all the better, you

know, for such moral precision, although I called it absurd.' He went on with tender earnestness: 'For, Elfride, there is one thing I do love to see in a woman — that is, a soul truthful and clear as heaven's light. I could put up with anything if I had that — forgive nothing if I had it not. Elfride, you have such a soul, if ever woman had; and having it, retain it, and don't ever listen to the fashionable theories of the day about a woman's privileges and natural right to practise wiles. Depend upon it, my dear girl, that a noble woman must be as honest as a noble man. I specially mean by honesty, fairness not only in matters of business and social detail, but in all the delicate dealings of love, to which the licence given to your sex particularly refers.'

Elfride looked troublously at the trees.

'Now let us go on to the river, Elfie.'

'I would if I had a hat on,' she said with a sort of suppressed woe.

'I will get it for you,' said Knight, very willing to purchase her companionship at so cheap a price. 'You sit down there a minute.' And he turned and walked rapidly back to the house for the article in question.

Elfride sat down upon one of the rustic benches which adorned this portion of the grounds, and remained with her eyes upon the grass. She was induced to lift them by hearing the brush of light and irregular footsteps hard by. Passing along the path which intersected the one she was in and traversed the outer shrubberies, Elfride beheld the farmer's widow, Mrs. Jethway. Before she noticed Elfride, she paused to look at the house, portions of which were visible through the bushes. Elfride, shrinking back, hoped the unpleasant woman might go on without seeing her. But Mrs. Jethway, silently apostrophizing the house, with actions which seemed dictated by a half-overturned reason, had discerned the girl, and immediately came up and stood in front of her.

'Ah, Miss Swancourt! Why did you disturb me? Mustn't I trespass here?'

'You may walk here if you like, Mrs. Jethway. I do not disturb you.'

'You disturb my mind, and my mind is my whole life; for my boy is there still, and he is gone from my body.'

'Yes, poor young man. I was sorry when he died.'

'Do you know what he died of?'

'Consumption.'

'Oh no, no!' said the widow. 'That word "consumption" covers a good deal. He died because you were his own well-agreed sweetheart, and then proved false — and it killed him. Yes, Miss Swancourt,' she said in an excited whisper, 'you killed my son!'

'How can you be so wicked and foolish!' replied Elfride, rising indignantly. But indignation was not natural to her, and having been so worn and harrowed by late events, she lost any powers of defence that mood might have lent her. 'I could not help his loving me, Mrs. Jethway!'

'That's just what you could have helped. You know how it began, Miss Elfride. Yes: you said you liked the name of Felix better than any other name in the parish, and you knew it was his name, and that those you said it to would report it to him.'

‘I knew it was his name — of course I did; but I am sure, Mrs. Jethway, I did not intend anybody to tell him.’

‘But you knew they would.’

‘No, I didn’t.’

‘And then, after that, when you were riding on Revels-day by our house, and the lads were gathered there, and you wanted to dismount, when Jim Drake and George Upway and three or four more ran forward to hold your pony, and Felix stood back timid, why did you beckon to him, and say you would rather he held it?’

‘O Mrs. Jethway, you do think so mistakenly! I liked him best — that’s why I wanted him to do it. He was gentle and nice — I always thought him so — and I liked him.’

‘Then why did you let him kiss you?’

‘It is a falsehood; oh, it is, it is!’ said Elfride, weeping with desperation. ‘He came behind me, and attempted to kiss me; and that was why I told him never to let me see him again.’

‘But you did not tell your father or anybody, as you would have if you had looked upon it then as the insult you now pretend it was.’

‘He begged me not to tell, and foolishly enough I did not. And I wish I had now. I little expected to be scourged with my own kindness. Pray leave me, Mrs. Jethway.’ The girl only expostulated now.

‘Well, you harshly dismissed him, and he died. And before his body was cold, you took another to your heart. Then as carelessly sent him about his business, and took a third. And if you consider that nothing, Miss Swancourt,’ she continued, drawing closer; ‘it led on to what was very serious indeed. Have you forgotten the would-be runaway marriage? The journey to London, and the return the next day without being married, and that there’s enough disgrace in that to ruin a woman’s good name far less light than yours? You may have: I have not. Fickleness towards a lover is bad, but fickleness after playing the wife is wantonness.’

‘Oh, it’s a wicked cruel lie! Do not say it; oh, do not!’

‘Does your new man know of it? I think not, or he would be no man of yours! As much of the story as was known is creeping about the neighbourhood even now; but I know more than any of them, and why should I respect your love?’

‘I defy you!’ cried Elfride tempestuously. ‘Do and say all you can to ruin me; try; put your tongue at work; I invite it! I defy you as a slanderous woman! Look, there he comes.’ And her voice trembled greatly as she saw through the leaves the beloved form of Knight coming from the door with her hat in his hand. ‘Tell him at once; I can bear it.’

‘Not now,’ said the woman, and disappeared down the path.

The excitement of her latter words had restored colour to Elfride’s cheeks; and hastily wiping her eyes, she walked farther on, so that by the time her lover had overtaken her the traces of emotion had nearly disappeared from her face. Knight put the hat upon her head, took her hand, and drew it within his arm.

It was the last day but one previous to their departure for St. Leonards; and Knight seemed to have a purpose in being much in her company that day. They rambled along the valley. The season was that period in the autumn when the foliage alone of an ordinary plantation is rich enough in hues to exhaust the chromatic combinations of an artist's palette. Most lustrous of all are the beeches, graduating from bright rusty red at the extremity of the boughs to a bright yellow at their inner parts; young oaks are still of a neutral green; Scotch firs and hollies are nearly blue; whilst occasional dottings of other varieties give maroons and purples of every tinge.

The river — such as it was — here pursued its course amid flagstones as level as a pavement, but divided by crevices of irregular width. With the summer drought the torrent had narrowed till it was now but a thread of crystal clearness, meandering along a central channel in the rocky bed of the winter current. Knight scrambled through the bushes which at this point nearly covered the brook from sight, and leapt down upon the dry portion of the river bottom.

‘Elfride, I never saw such a sight!’ he exclaimed. ‘The hazels overhang the river’s course in a perfect arch, and the floor is beautifully paved. The place reminds one of the passages of a cloister. Let me help you down.’

He assisted her through the marginal underwood and down to the stones. They walked on together to a tiny cascade about a foot wide and high, and sat down beside it on the flags that for nine months in the year were submerged beneath a gushing bourne. From their feet trickled the attenuated thread of water which alone remained to tell the intent and reason of this leaf-covered aisle, and journeyed on in a zigzag line till lost in the shade.

Knight, leaning on his elbow, after contemplating all this, looked critically at Elfride.

‘Does not such a luxuriant head of hair exhaust itself and get thin as the years go on from eighteen to eight-and-twenty?’ he asked at length.

‘Oh no!’ she said quickly, with a visible disinclination to harbour such a thought, which came upon her with an unpleasantness whose force it would be difficult for men to understand. She added afterwards, with smouldering uneasiness, ‘Do you really think that a great abundance of hair is more likely to get thin than a moderate quantity?’

‘Yes, I really do. I believe — am almost sure, in fact — that if statistics could be obtained on the subject, you would find the persons with thin hair were those who had a superabundance originally, and that those who start with a moderate quantity retain it without much loss.’

Elfride’s troubles sat upon her face as well as in her heart. Perhaps to a woman it is almost as dreadful to think of losing her beauty as of losing her reputation. At any rate, she looked quite as gloomy as she had looked at any minute that day.

‘You shouldn’t be so troubled about a mere personal adornment,’ said Knight, with some of the severity of tone that had been customary before she had beguiled him into softness.

‘I think it is a woman’s duty to be as beautiful as she can. If I were a scholar, I would give you chapter and verse for it from one of your own Latin authors. I know there is such a passage, for papa has alluded to it.’

“‘Munditia, et ornatus, et cultus,’ &c. — is that it? A passage in Livy which is no defence at all.’

‘No, it is not that.’

‘Never mind, then; for I have a reason for not taking up my old cudgels against you, Elfie. Can you guess what the reason is?’

‘No; but I am glad to hear it,’ she said thankfully. ‘For it is dreadful when you talk so. For whatever dreadful name the weakness may deserve, I must candidly own that I am terrified to think my hair may ever get thin.’

‘Of course; a sensible woman would rather lose her wits than her beauty.’

‘I don’t care if you do say satire and judge me cruelly. I know my hair is beautiful; everybody says so.’

‘Why, my dear Miss Swancourt,’ he tenderly replied, ‘I have not said anything against it. But you know what is said about handsome being and handsome doing.’

‘Poor Miss Handsome-does cuts but a sorry figure beside Miss Handsome-is in every man’s eyes, your own not excepted, Mr. Knight, though it pleases you to throw off so,’ said Elfride saucily. And lowering her voice: ‘You ought not to have taken so much trouble to save me from falling over the cliff, for you don’t think mine a life worth much trouble evidently.’

‘Perhaps you think mine was not worth yours.’

‘It was worth anybody’s!’

Her hand was plashing in the little waterfall, and her eyes were bent the same way.

‘You talk about my severity with you, Elfride. You are unkind to me, you know.’

‘How?’ she asked, looking up from her idle occupation.

‘After my taking trouble to get jewellery to please you, you wouldn’t accept it.’

‘Perhaps I would now; perhaps I want to.’

‘Do!’ said Knight.

And the packet was withdrawn from his pocket and presented the third time. Elfride took it with delight. The obstacle was rent in twain, and the significant gift was hers.

‘I’ll take out these ugly ones at once,’ she exclaimed, ‘and I’ll wear yours — shall I?’

‘I should be gratified.’

Now, though it may seem unlikely, considering how far the two had gone in converse, Knight had never yet ventured to kiss Elfride. Far slower was he than Stephen Smith in matters like that. The utmost advance he had made in such demonstrations had been to the degree witnessed by Stephen in the summer-house. So Elfride’s cheek being still forbidden fruit to him, he said impulsively.

‘Elfie, I should like to touch that seductive ear of yours. Those are my gifts; so let me dress you in them.’

She hesitated with a stimulating hesitation.

‘Let me put just one in its place, then?’

Her face grew much warmer.

‘I don’t think it would be quite the usual or proper course,’ she said, suddenly turning and resuming her operation of plashing in the miniature cataract.

The stillness of things was disturbed by a bird coming to the streamlet to drink. After watching him dip his bill, sprinkle himself, and fly into a tree, Knight replied, with the courteous brusqueness she so much liked to hear —

‘Elfride, now you may as well be fair. You would mind my doing it but little, I think; so give me leave, do.’

‘I will be fair, then,’ she said confidently, and looking him full in the face. It was a particular pleasure to her to be able to do a little honesty without fear. ‘I should not mind your doing so — I should like such an attention. My thought was, would it be right to let you?’

‘Then I will!’ he rejoined, with that singular earnestness about a small matter — in the eyes of a ladies’ man but a momentary peg for flirtation or jest — which is only found in deep natures who have been wholly unused to toying with womankind, and which, from its unwontedness, is in itself a tribute the most precious that can be rendered, and homage the most exquisite to be received.

‘And you shall,’ she whispered, without reserve, and no longer mistress of the ceremonies. And then Elfride inclined herself towards him, thrust back her hair, and poised her head sideways. In doing this her arm and shoulder necessarily rested against his breast.

At the touch, the sensation of both seemed to be concentrated at the point of contact. All the time he was performing the delicate manoeuvre Knight trembled like a young surgeon in his first operation.

‘Now the other,’ said Knight in a whisper.

‘No, no.’

‘Why not?’

‘I don’t know exactly.’

‘You must know.’

‘Your touch agitates me so. Let us go home.’

‘Don’t say that, Elfride. What is it, after all? A mere nothing. Now turn round, dearest.’

She was powerless to disobey, and turned forthwith; and then, without any defined intention in either’s mind, his face and hers drew closer together; and he supported her there, and kissed her.

Knight was at once the most ardent and the coolest man alive. When his emotions slumbered he appeared almost phlegmatic; when they were moved he was no less than passionate. And now, without having quite intended an early marriage, he put the question plainly. It came with all the ardour which was the accumulation of long years behind a natural reserve.

‘Elfride, when shall we be married?’

The words were sweet to her; but there was a bitter in the sweet. These newly-overt acts of his, which had culminated in this plain question, coming on the very day of Mrs. Jethway's blasting reproaches, painted distinctly her fickleness as an enormity. Loving him in secret had not seemed such thorough-going inconstancy as the same love recognized and acted upon in the face of threats. Her distraction was interpreted by him at her side as the outward signs of an unwonted experience.

'I don't press you for an answer now, darling,' he said, seeing she was not likely to give a lucid reply. 'Take your time.'

Knight was as honourable a man as was ever loved and deluded by woman. It may be said that his blindness in love proved the point, for shrewdness in love usually goes with meanness in general. Once the passion had mastered him, the intellect had gone for naught. Knight, as a lover, was more single-minded and far simpler than his friend Stephen, who in other capacities was shallow beside him.

Without saying more on the subject of their marriage, Knight held her at arm's length, as if she had been a large bouquet, and looked at her with critical affection.

'Does your pretty gift become me?' she inquired, with tears of excitement on the fringes of her eyes.

'Undoubtedly, perfectly!' said her lover, adopting a lighter tone to put her at her ease. 'Ah, you should see them; you look shinier than ever. Fancy that I have been able to improve you!'

'Am I really so nice? I am glad for your sake. I wish I could see myself.'

'You can't. You must wait till we get home.'

'I shall never be able,' she said, laughing. 'Look: here's a way.'

'So there is. Well done, woman's wit!'

'Hold me steady!'

'Oh yes.'

'And don't let me fall, will you?'

'By no means.'

Below their seat the thread of water paused to spread out into a smooth small pool. Knight supported her whilst she knelt down and leant over it.

'I can see myself. Really, try as religiously as I will, I cannot help admiring my appearance in them.'

'Doubtless. How can you be so fond of finery? I believe you are corrupting me into a taste for it. I used to hate every such thing before I knew you.'

'I like ornaments, because I want people to admire what you possess, and envy you, and say, "I wish I was he."'

'I suppose I ought not to object after that. And how much longer are you going to look in there at yourself?'

'Until you are tired of holding me? Oh, I want to ask you something.' And she turned round. 'Now tell truly, won't you? What colour of hair do you like best now?'

Knight did not answer at the moment.

'Say light, do!' she whispered coaxingly. 'Don't say dark, as you did that time.'

‘Light-brown, then. Exactly the colour of my sweetheart’s.’

‘Really?’ said Elfride, enjoying as truth what she knew to be flattery.

‘Yes.’

‘And blue eyes, too, not hazel? Say yes, say yes!’

‘One recantation is enough for to-day.’

‘No, no.’

‘Very well, blue eyes.’ And Knight laughed, and drew her close and kissed her the second time, which operations he performed with the carefulness of a fruiterer touching a bunch of grapes so as not to disturb their bloom.

Elfride objected to a second, and flung away her face, the movement causing a slight disarrangement of hat and hair. Hardly thinking what she said in the trepidation of the moment, she exclaimed, clapping her hand to her ear —

‘Ah, we must be careful! I lost the other earring doing like this.’

No sooner did she realise the significant words than a troubled look passed across her face, and she shut her lips as if to keep them back.

‘Doing like what?’ said Knight, perplexed.

‘Oh, sitting down out of doors,’ she replied hastily.

CHAPTER XXIX

‘Care, thou canker.’

It is an evening at the beginning of October, and the mellowest of autumn sunsets irradiates London, even to its uttermost eastern end. Between the eye and the flaming West, columns of smoke stand up in the still air like tall trees. Everything in the shade is rich and misty blue.

Mr. and Mrs. Swancourt and Elfride are looking at these lustrous and lurid contrasts from the window of a large hotel near London Bridge. The visit to their friends at St. Leonards is over, and they are staying a day or two in the metropolis on their way home.

Knight spent the same interval of time in crossing over to Brittany by way of Jersey and St. Malo. He then passed through Normandy, and returned to London also, his arrival there having been two days later than that of Elfride and her parents.

So the evening of this October day saw them all meeting at the above-mentioned hotel, where they had previously engaged apartments. During the afternoon Knight had been to his lodgings at Richmond to make a little change in the nature of his baggage; and on coming up again there was never ushered by a bland waiter into a comfortable room a happier man than Knight when shown to where Elfride and her step-mother were sitting after a fatiguing day of shopping.

Elfride looked none the better for her change: Knight was as brown as a nut. They were soon engaged by themselves in a corner of the room. Now that the precious words of promise had been spoken, the young girl had no idea of keeping up her price by the

system of reserve which other more accomplished maidens use. Her lover was with her again, and it was enough: she made her heart over to him entirely.

Dinner was soon despatched. And when a preliminary round of conversation concerning their doings since the last parting had been concluded, they reverted to the subject of to-morrow's journey home.

'That enervating ride through the myrtle climate of South Devon — how I dread it to-morrow!' Mrs. Swancourt was saying. 'I had hoped the weather would have been cooler by this time.'

'Did you ever go by water?' said Knight.

'Never — by never, I mean not since the time of railways.'

'Then if you can afford an additional day, I propose that we do it,' said Knight. 'The Channel is like a lake just now. We should reach Plymouth in about forty hours, I think, and the boats start from just below the bridge here' (pointing over his shoulder eastward).

'Hear, hear!' said the vicar.

'It's an idea, certainly,' said his wife.

'Of course these coasters are rather tubby,' said Knight. 'But you wouldn't mind that?'

'No: we wouldn't mind.'

'And the saloon is a place like the fishmarket of a ninth-rate country town, but that wouldn't matter?'

'Oh dear, no. If we had only thought of it soon enough, we might have had the use of Lord Luxellian's yacht. But never mind, we'll go. We shall escape the worrying rattle through the whole length of London to-morrow morning — not to mention the risk of being killed by excursion trains, which is not a little one at this time of the year, if the papers are true.'

Elfride, too, thought the arrangement delightful; and accordingly, ten o'clock the following morning saw two cabs crawling round by the Mint, and between the preternaturally high walls of Nightingale Lane towards the river side.

The first vehicle was occupied by the travellers in person, and the second brought up the luggage, under the supervision of Mrs. Snewson, Mrs. Swancourt's maid — and for the last fortnight Elfride's also; for although the younger lady had never been accustomed to any such attendant at robing times, her stepmother forced her into a semblance of familiarity with one when they were away from home.

Presently waggons, bales, and smells of all descriptions increased to such an extent that the advance of the cabs was at the slowest possible rate. At intervals it was necessary to halt entirely, that the heavy vehicles unloading in front might be moved aside, a feat which was not accomplished without a deal of swearing and noise. The vicar put his head out of the window.

'Surely there must be some mistake in the way,' he said with great concern, drawing in his head again. 'There's not a respectable conveyance to be seen here except ours. I've heard that there are strange dens in this part of London, into which people have

been entrapped and murdered — surely there is no conspiracy on the part of the cabman?’

‘Oh no, no. It is all right,’ said Mr. Knight, who was as placid as dewy eve by the side of Elfride.

‘But what I argue from,’ said the vicar, with a greater emphasis of uneasiness, ‘are plain appearances. This can’t be the highway from London to Plymouth by water, because it is no way at all to any place. We shall miss our steamer and our train too — that’s what I think.’

‘Depend upon it we are right. In fact, here we are.’

‘Trimmer’s Wharf,’ said the cabman, opening the door.

No sooner had they alighted than they perceived a tussle going on between the hindmost cabman and a crowd of light porters who had charged him in column, to obtain possession of the bags and boxes, Mrs. Snewson’s hands being seen stretched towards heaven in the midst of the melee. Knight advanced gallantly, and after a hard struggle reduced the crowd to two, upon whose shoulders and trucks the goods vanished away in the direction of the water’s edge with startling rapidity.

Then more of the same tribe, who had run on ahead, were heard shouting to boatmen, three of whom pulled alongside, and two being vanquished, the luggage went tumbling into the remaining one.

‘Never saw such a dreadful scene in my life — never!’ said Mr. Swancourt, floundering into the boat. ‘Worse than Famine and Sword upon one. I thought such customs were confined to continental ports. Aren’t you astonished, Elfride?’

‘Oh no,’ said Elfride, appearing amid the dingy scene like a rainbow in a murky sky. ‘It is a pleasant novelty, I think.’

‘Where in the wide ocean is our steamer?’ the vicar inquired. ‘I can see nothing but old hulks, for the life of me.’

‘Just behind that one,’ said Knight; ‘we shall soon be round under her.’

The object of their search was soon after disclosed to view — a great lumbering form of inky blackness, which looked as if it had never known the touch of a paint-brush for fifty years. It was lying beside just such another, and the way on board was down a narrow lane of water between the two, about a yard and a half wide at one end, and gradually converging to a point. At the moment of their entry into this narrow passage, a brilliantly painted rival paddled down the river like a trotting steed, creating such a series of waves and splashes that their frail wherry was tossed like a teacup, and the vicar and his wife slanted this way and that, inclining their heads into contact with a Punch-and-Judy air and countenance, the wavelets striking the sides of the two hulls, and flapping back into their laps.

‘Dreadful! horrible!’ Mr. Swancourt murmured privately; and said aloud, I thought we walked on board. I don’t think really I should have come, if I had known this trouble was attached to it.’

‘If they must splash, I wish they would splash us with clean water,’ said the old lady, wiping her dress with her handkerchief.

'I hope it is perfectly safe,' continued the vicar.

'O papa! you are not very brave,' cried Elfride merrily.

'Bravery is only obtuseness to the perception of contingencies,' Mr. Swancourt severely answered.

Mrs. Swancourt laughed, and Elfride laughed, and Knight laughed, in the midst of which pleasantness a man shouted to them from some position between their heads and the sky, and they found they were close to the Juliet, into which they quiveringly ascended.

It having been found that the lowness of the tide would prevent their getting off for an hour, the Swancourts, having nothing else to do, allowed their eyes to idle upon men in blue jerseys performing mysterious mending operations with tar-twine; they turned to look at the dashes of lurid sunlight, like burnished copper stars afloat on the ripples, which danced into and tantalised their vision; or listened to the loud music of a steam-crane at work close by; or to sighing sounds from the funnels of passing steamers, getting dead as they grew more distant; or to shouts from the decks of different craft in their vicinity, all of them assuming the form of 'Ah-he-hay!'

Half-past ten: not yet off. Mr. Swancourt breathed a breath of weariness, and looked at his fellow-travellers in general. Their faces were certainly not worth looking at. The expression 'Waiting' was written upon them so absolutely that nothing more could be discerned there. All animation was suspended till Providence should raise the water and let them go.

'I have been thinking,' said Knight, 'that we have come amongst the rarest class of people in the kingdom. Of all human characteristics, a low opinion of the value of his own time by an individual must be among the strangest to find. Here we see numbers of that patient and happy species. Rovers, as distinct from travellers.'

'But they are pleasure-seekers, to whom time is of no importance.'

'Oh no. The pleasure-seekers we meet on the grand routes are more anxious than commercial travellers to rush on. And added to the loss of time in getting to their journey's end, these exceptional people take their chance of sea-sickness by coming this way.'

'Can it be?' inquired the vicar with apprehension. 'Surely not, Mr. Knight, just here in our English Channel — close at our doors, as I may say.'

'Entrance passages are very draughty places, and the Channel is like the rest. It ruins the temper of sailors. It has been calculated by philosophers that more damns go up to heaven from the Channel, in the course of a year, than from all the five oceans put together.'

They really start now, and the dead looks of all the throng come to life immediately. The man who has been frantically hauling in a rope that bade fair to have no end ceases his labours, and they glide down the serpentine bends of the Thames.

Anything anywhere was a mine of interest to Elfride, and so was this.

'It is well enough now,' said Mrs. Swancourt, after they had passed the Nore, 'but I can't say I have cared for my voyage hitherto.' For being now in the open sea a slight

breeze had sprung up, which cheered her as well as her two younger companions. But unfortunately it had a reverse effect upon the vicar, who, after turning a sort of apricot jam colour, interspersed with dashes of raspberry, pleaded indisposition, and vanished from their sight.

The afternoon wore on. Mrs. Swancourt kindly sat apart by herself reading, and the betrothed pair were left to themselves. Elfride clung trustingly to Knight's arm, and proud was she to walk with him up and down the deck, or to go forward, and leaning with him against the fore-castle rails, watch the setting sun gradually withdrawing itself over their stern into a huge bank of livid cloud with golden edges that rose to meet it.

She was childishly full of life and spirits, though in walking up and down with him before the other passengers, and getting noticed by them, she was at starting rather confused, it being the first time she had shown herself so openly under that kind of protection. 'I expect they are envious and saying things about us, don't you?' she would whisper to Knight with a stealthy smile.

'Oh no,' he would answer unconcernedly. 'Why should they envy us, and what can they say?'

'Not any harm, of course,' Elfride replied, 'except such as this: "How happy those two are! she is proud enough now." What makes it worse,' she continued in the extremity of confidence, 'I heard those two cricketing men say just now, "She's the nobbiest girl on the boat." But I don't mind it, you know, Harry.'

'I should hardly have supposed you did, even if you had not told me,' said Knight with great blandness.

She was never tired of asking her lover questions and admiring his answers, good, bad, or indifferent as they might be. The evening grew dark and night came on, and lights shone upon them from the horizon and from the sky.

'Now look there ahead of us, at that halo in the air, of silvery brightness. Watch it, and you will see what it comes to.'

She watched for a few minutes, when two white lights emerged from the side of a hill, and showed themselves to be the origin of the halo.

'What a dazzling brilliance! What do they mark?'

'The South Foreland: they were previously covered by the cliff.'

'What is that level line of little sparkles — a town, I suppose?'

'That's Dover.'

All this time, and later, soft sheet lightning expanded from a cloud in their path, enkindling their faces as they paced up and down, shining over the water, and, for a moment, showing the horizon as a keen line.

Elfride slept soundly that night. Her first thought the next morning was the thrilling one that Knight was as close at hand as when they were at home at Endelstow, and her first sight, on looking out of the cabin window, was the perpendicular face of Beachy Head, gleaming white in a brilliant six-o'clock-in-the-morning sun. This fair daybreak, however, soon changed its aspect. A cold wind and a pale mist descended upon the sea, and seemed to threaten a dreary day.

When they were nearing Southampton, Mrs. Swancourt came to say that her husband was so ill that he wished to be put on shore here, and left to do the remainder of the journey by land. 'He will be perfectly well directly he treads firm ground again. Which shall we do — go with him, or finish our voyage as we intended?'

Elfride was comfortably housed under an umbrella which Knight was holding over her to keep off the wind. 'Oh, don't let us go on shore!' she said with dismay. 'It would be such a pity!'

'That's very fine,' said Mrs. Swancourt archly, as to a child. 'See, the wind has increased her colour, the sea her appetite and spirits, and somebody her happiness. Yes, it would be a pity, certainly.'

'Tis my misfortune to be always spoken to from a pedestal,' sighed Elfride.

'Well, we will do as you like, Mrs. Swancourt,' said Knight, 'but — —'

'I myself would rather remain on board,' interrupted the elder lady. 'And Mr. Swancourt particularly wishes to go by himself. So that shall settle the matter.'

The vicar, now a drab colour, was put ashore, and became as well as ever forthwith.

Elfride, sitting alone in a retired part of the vessel, saw a veiled woman walk aboard among the very latest arrivals at this port. She was clothed in black silk, and carried a dark shawl upon her arm. The woman, without looking around her, turned to the quarter allotted to the second-cabin passengers. All the carnation Mrs. Swancourt had complimented her step-daughter upon possessing left Elfride's cheeks, and she trembled visibly.

She ran to the other side of the boat, where Mrs. Swancourt was standing.

'Let us go home by railway with papa, after all,' she pleaded earnestly. 'I would rather go with him — shall we?'

Mrs. Swancourt looked around for a moment, as if unable to decide. 'Ah,' she exclaimed, 'it is too late now. Why did not you say so before, when we had plenty of time?'

The Juliet had at that minute let go, the engines had started, and they were gliding slowly away from the quay. There was no help for it but to remain, unless the Juliet could be made to put back, and that would create a great disturbance. Elfride gave up the idea and submitted quietly. Her happiness was sadly mutilated now.

The woman whose presence had so disturbed her was exactly like Mrs. Jethway. She seemed to haunt Elfride like a shadow. After several minutes' vain endeavour to account for any design Mrs. Jethway could have in watching her, Elfride decided to think that, if it were the widow, the encounter was accidental. She remembered that the widow in her restlessness was often visiting the village near Southampton, which was her original home, and it was possible that she chose water-transit with the idea of saving expense.

'What is the matter, Elfride?' Knight inquired, standing before her.

'Nothing more than that I am rather depressed.'

‘I don’t much wonder at it; that wharf was depressing. We seemed underneath and inferior to everything around us. But we shall be in the sea breeze again soon, and that will freshen you, dear.’

The evening closed in and dusk increased as they made way down Southampton Water and through the Solent. Elfride’s disturbance of mind was such that her light spirits of the foregoing four and twenty hours had entirely deserted her. The weather too had grown more gloomy, for though the showers of the morning had ceased, the sky was covered more closely than ever with dense leaden clouds. How beautiful was the sunset when they rounded the North Foreland the previous evening! now it was impossible to tell within half an hour the time of the luminary’s going down. Knight led her about, and being by this time accustomed to her sudden changes of mood, overlooked the necessity of a cause in regarding the conditions — impressionableness and elasticity.

Elfride looked stealthily to the other end of the vessel. Mrs. Jethway, or her double, was sitting at the stern — her eye steadily regarding Elfride.

‘Let us go to the forepart,’ she said quickly to Knight. ‘See there — the man is fixing the lights for the night.’

Knight assented, and after watching the operation of fixing the red and the green lights on the port and starboard bows, and the hoisting of the white light to the mast-head, he walked up and down with her till the increase of wind rendered promenading difficult. Elfride’s eyes were occasionally to be found furtively gazing abaft, to learn if her enemy were really there. Nobody was visible now.

‘Shall we go below?’ said Knight, seeing that the deck was nearly deserted.

‘No,’ she said. ‘If you will kindly get me a rug from Mrs. Swancourt, I should like, if you don’t mind, to stay here.’ She had recently fancied the assumed Mrs. Jethway might be a first-class passenger, and dreaded meeting her by accident.

Knight appeared with the rug, and they sat down behind a weather-cloth on the windward side, just as the two red eyes of the Needles glared upon them from the gloom, their pointed summits rising like shadowy phantom figures against the sky. It became necessary to go below to an eight-o’clock meal of nondescript kind, and Elfride was immensely relieved at finding no sign of Mrs. Jethway there. They again ascended, and remained above till Mrs. Snewson staggered up to them with the message that Mrs. Swancourt thought it was time for Elfride to come below. Knight accompanied her down, and returned again to pass a little more time on deck.

Elfride partly undressed herself and lay down, and soon became unconscious, though her sleep was light. How long she had lain, she knew not, when by slow degrees she became cognizant of a whispering in her ear.

‘You are well on with him, I can see. Well, provoke me now, but my day will come, you will find.’ That seemed to be the utterance, or words to that effect.

Elfride became broad awake and terrified. She knew the words, if real, could be only those of one person, and that person the widow Jethway.

The lamp had gone out and the place was in darkness. In the next berth she could hear her stepmother breathing heavily, further on Snewson breathing more heavily still. These were the only other legitimate occupants of the cabin, and Mrs. Jethway must have stealthily come in by some means and retreated again, or else she had entered an empty berth next Snewson's. The fear that this was the case increased Elfride's perturbation, till it assumed the dimensions of a certainty, for how could a stranger from the other end of the ship possibly contrive to get in? Could it have been a dream?

Elfride raised herself higher and looked out of the window. There was the sea, floundering and rushing against the ship's side just by her head, and thence stretching away, dim and moaning, into an expanse of indistinctness; and far beyond all this two placid lights like rayless stars. Now almost fearing to turn her face inwards again, lest Mrs. Jethway should appear at her elbow, Elfride meditated upon whether to call Snewson to keep her company. 'Four bells' sounded, and she heard voices, which gave her a little courage. It was not worth while to call Snewson.

At any rate Elfride could not stay there panting longer, at the risk of being again disturbed by that dreadful whispering. So wrapping herself up hurriedly she emerged into the passage, and by the aid of a faint light burning at the entrance to the saloon found the foot of the stairs, and ascended to the deck. Dreary the place was in the extreme. It seemed a new spot altogether in contrast with its daytime self. She could see the glowworm light from the binnacle, and the dim outline of the man at the wheel; also a form at the bows. Not another soul was apparent from stem to stern.

Yes, there were two more — by the bulwarks. One proved to be her Harry, the other the mate. She was glad indeed, and on drawing closer found they were holding a low slow chat about nautical affairs. She ran up and slipped her hand through Knight's arm, partly for love, partly for stability.

'Elfie! not asleep?' said Knight, after moving a few steps aside with her.

'No: I cannot sleep. May I stay here? It is so dismal down there, and — and I was afraid. Where are we now?'

'Due south of Portland Bill. Those are the lights abeam of us: look. A terrible spot, that, on a stormy night. And do you see a very small light that dips and rises to the right? That's a light-ship on the dangerous shoal called the Shambles, where many a good vessel has gone to pieces. Between it and ourselves is the Race — a place where antagonistic currents meet and form whirlpools — a spot which is rough in the smoothest weather, and terrific in a wind. That dark, dreary horizon we just discern to the left is the West Bay, terminated landwards by the Chesil Beach.'

'What time is it, Harry?'

'Just past two.'

'Are you going below?'

'Oh no; not to-night. I prefer pure air.'

She fancied he might be displeased with her for coming to him at this unearthly hour. 'I should like to stay here too, if you will allow me,' she said timidly.

'I want to ask you things.'

‘Allow you, Elfie!’ said Knight, putting his arm round her and drawing her closer. ‘I am twice as happy with you by my side. Yes: we will stay, and watch the approach of day.’

So they again sought out the sheltered nook, and sitting down wrapped themselves in the rug as before.

‘What were you going to ask me?’ he inquired, as they undulated up and down.

‘Oh, it was not much — perhaps a thing I ought not to ask,’ she said hesitatingly. Her sudden wish had really been to discover at once whether he had ever before been engaged to be married. If he had, she would make that a ground for telling him a little of her conduct with Stephen. Mrs. Jethway’s seeming words had so depressed the girl that she herself now painted her flight in the darkest colours, and longed to ease her burdened mind by an instant confession. If Knight had ever been imprudent himself, he might, she hoped, forgive all.

‘I wanted to ask you,’ she went on, ‘if — you had ever been engaged before.’ She added tremulously, ‘I hope you have — I mean, I don’t mind at all if you have.’

‘No, I never was,’ Knight instantly and heartily replied. ‘Elfride’ — and there was a certain happy pride in his tone — ‘I am twelve years older than you, and I have been about the world, and, in a way, into society, and you have not. And yet I am not so unfit for you as strict-thinking people might imagine, who would assume the difference in age to signify most surely an equal addition to my practice in love-making.’

Elfride shivered.

‘You are cold — is the wind too much for you?’

‘No,’ she said gloomily. The belief which had been her sheet-anchor in hoping for forgiveness had proved false. This account of the exceptional nature of his experience, a matter which would have set her rejoicing two years ago, chilled her now like a frost.

‘You don’t mind my asking you?’ she continued.

‘Oh no — not at all.’

‘And have you never kissed many ladies?’ she whispered, hoping he would say a hundred at the least.

The time, the circumstances, and the scene were such as to draw confidences from the most reserved. ‘Elfride,’ whispered Knight in reply, ‘it is strange you should have asked that question. But I’ll answer it, though I have never told such a thing before. I have been rather absurd in my avoidance of women. I have never given a woman a kiss in my life, except yourself and my mother.’ The man of two and thirty with the experienced mind warmed all over with a boy’s ingenuous shame as he made the confession.

‘What, not one?’ she faltered.

‘No; not one.’

‘How very strange!’

‘Yes, the reverse experience may be commoner. And yet, to those who have observed their own sex, as I have, my case is not remarkable. Men about town are women’s

favourites — that's the postulate — and superficial people don't think far enough to see that there may be reserved, lonely exceptions.'

'Are you proud of it, Harry?'

'No, indeed. Of late years I have wished I had gone my ways and trod out my measure like lighter-hearted men. I have thought of how many happy experiences I may have lost through never going to woo.'

'Then why did you hold aloof?'

'I cannot say. I don't think it was my nature to: circumstance hindered me, perhaps. I have regretted it for another reason. This great remissness of mine has had its effect upon me. The older I have grown, the more distinctly have I perceived that it was absolutely preventing me from liking any woman who was not as unpractised as I; and I gave up the expectation of finding a nineteenth-century young lady in my own raw state. Then I found you, Elfride, and I felt for the first time that my fastidiousness was a blessing. And it helped to make me worthy of you. I felt at once that, differing as we did in other experiences, in this matter I resembled you. Well, aren't you glad to hear it, Elfride?'

'Yes, I am,' she answered in a forced voice. 'But I always had thought that men made lots of engagements before they married — especially if they don't marry very young.'

'So all women think, I suppose — and rightly, indeed, of the majority of bachelors, as I said before. But an appreciable minority of slow-coach men do not — and it makes them very awkward when they do come to the point. However, it didn't matter in my case.'

'Why?' she asked uneasily.

'Because you know even less of love-making and matrimonial prearrangement than I, and so you can't draw invidious comparisons if I do my engaging improperly.'

'I think you do it beautifully!'

'Thank you, dear. But,' continued Knight laughingly, 'your opinion is not that of an expert, which alone is of value.'

Had she answered, 'Yes, it is,' half as strongly as she felt it, Knight might have been a little astonished.

'If you had ever been engaged to be married before,' he went on, 'I expect your opinion of my addresses would be different. But then, I should not — —'

'Should not what, Harry?'

'Oh, I was merely going to say that in that case I should never have given myself the pleasure of proposing to you, since your freedom from that experience was your attraction, darling.'

'You are severe on women, are you not?'

'No, I think not. I had a right to please my taste, and that was for untried lips. Other men than those of my sort acquire the taste as they get older — but don't find an Elfride — —'

'What horrid sound is that we hear when we pitch forward?'

‘Only the screw — don’t find an Elfride as I did. To think that I should have discovered such an unseen flower down there in the West — to whom a man is as much as a multitude to some women, and a trip down the English Channel like a voyage round the world!’

‘And would you,’ she said, and her voice was tremulous, ‘have given up a lady — if you had become engaged to her — and then found she had had ONE kiss before yours — and would you have — gone away and left her?’

‘One kiss, — no, hardly for that.’

‘Two?’

‘Well — I could hardly say inventorially like that. Too much of that sort of thing certainly would make me dislike a woman. But let us confine our attention to ourselves, not go thinking of might have beens.’

So Elfride had allowed her thoughts to ‘dally with false surmise,’ and every one of Knight’s words fell upon her like a weight. After this they were silent for a long time, gazing upon the black mysterious sea, and hearing the strange voice of the restless wind. A rocking to and fro on the waves, when the breeze is not too violent and cold, produces a soothing effect even upon the most highly-wrought mind. Elfride slowly sank against Knight, and looking down, he found by her soft regular breathing that she had fallen asleep. Not wishing to disturb her, he continued still, and took an intense pleasure in supporting her warm young form as it rose and fell with her every breath.

Knight fell to dreaming too, though he continued wide awake. It was pleasant to realise the implicit trust she placed in him, and to think of the charming innocence of one who could sink to sleep in so simple and unceremonious a manner. More than all, the musing unpractical student felt the immense responsibility he was taking upon himself by becoming the protector and guide of such a trusting creature. The quiet slumber of her soul lent a quietness to his own. Then she moaned, and turned herself restlessly. Presently her mutterings became distinct:

‘Don’t tell him — he will not love me...I did not mean any disgrace — indeed I did not, so don’t tell Harry. We were going to be married — that was why I ran away...And he says he will not have a kissed woman...And if you tell him he will go away, and I shall die. I pray have mercy — Oh!’

Elfride started up wildly.

The previous moment a musical ding-dong had spread into the air from their right hand, and awakened her.

‘What is it?’ she exclaimed in terror.

‘Only “eight bells,”’ said Knight soothingly. ‘Don’t be frightened, little bird, you are safe. What have you been dreaming about?’

‘I can’t tell, I can’t tell!’ she said with a shudder. ‘Oh, I don’t know what to do!’

‘Stay quietly with me. We shall soon see the dawn now. Look, the morning star is lovely over there. The clouds have completely cleared off whilst you have been sleeping. What have you been dreaming of?’

‘A woman in our parish.’

‘Don’t you like her?’

‘I don’t. She doesn’t like me. Where are we?’

‘About south of the Exe.’

Knight said no more on the words of her dream. They watched the sky till Elfride grew calm, and the dawn appeared. It was mere wan lightness first. Then the wind blew in a changed spirit, and died away to a zephyr. The star dissolved into the day.

‘That’s how I should like to die,’ said Elfride, rising from her seat and leaning over the bulwark to watch the star’s last expiring gleam.

‘As the lines say,’ Knight replied — —

“‘To set as sets the morning star, which goes
Not down behind the darken’d west, nor hides
Obscured among the tempests of the sky,
But melts away into the light of heaven.’”

‘Oh, other people have thought the same thing, have they? That’s always the case with my originalities — they are original to nobody but myself.’

‘Not only the case with yours. When I was a young hand at reviewing I used to find that a frightful pitfall — dilating upon subjects I met with, which were novelties to me, and finding afterwards they had been exhausted by the thinking world when I was in pinafores.’

‘That is delightful. Whenever I find you have done a foolish thing I am glad, because it seems to bring you a little nearer to me, who have done many.’ And Elfride thought again of her enemy asleep under the deck they trod.

All up the coast, prominences singled themselves out from recesses. Then a rosy sky spread over the eastern sea and behind the low line of land, flinging its livery in dashes upon the thin airy clouds in that direction. Every projection on the land seemed now so many fingers anxious to catch a little of the liquid light thrown so prodigally over the sky, and after a fantastic time of lustrous yellows in the east, the higher elevations along the shore were flooded with the same hues. The bluff and bare contours of Start Point caught the brightest, earliest glow of all, and so also did the sides of its white lighthouse, perched upon a shelf in its precipitous front like a mediaeval saint in a niche. Their lofty neighbour Bolt Head on the left remained as yet ungilded, and retained its gray.

Then up came the sun, as it were in jerks, just to seaward of the easternmost point of land, flinging out a Jacob’s-ladder path of light from itself to Elfride and Knight, and coating them with rays in a few minutes. The inferior dignitaries of the shore — Froward Point, Berry Head, and Prawle — all had acquired their share of the illumination ere this, and at length the very smallest protuberance of wave, cliff, or inlet, even to the innermost recesses of the lovely valley of the Dart, had its portion; and sunlight, now the common possession of all, ceased to be the wonderful and coveted thing it had been a short half hour before.

After breakfast, Plymouth arose into view, and grew distincter to their nearing vision, the Breakwater appearing like a streak of phosphoric light upon the surface of

the sea. Elfride looked furtively around for Mrs. Jethway, but could discern no shape like hers. Afterwards, in the bustle of landing, she looked again with the same result, by which time the woman had probably glided upon the quay unobserved. Expanding with a sense of relief, Elfride waited whilst Knight looked to their luggage, and then saw her father approaching through the crowd, twirling his walking-stick to catch their attention. Elbowing their way to him they all entered the town, which smiled as sunny a smile upon Elfride as it had done between one and two years earlier, when she had entered it at precisely the same hour as the bride-elect of Stephen Smith.

CHAPTER XXX

‘Vassal unto Love.’

Elfride clung closer to Knight as day succeeded day. Whatever else might admit of question, there could be no dispute that the allegiance she bore him absorbed her whole soul and existence. A greater than Stephen had arisen, and she had left all to follow him.

The unreserved girl was never chary of letting her lover discover how much she admired him. She never once held an idea in opposition to any one of his, or insisted on any point with him, or showed any independence, or held her own on any subject. His lightest whim she respected and obeyed as law, and if, expressing her opinion on a matter, he took up the subject and differed from her, she instantly threw down her own opinion as wrong and untenable. Even her ambiguities and espieglerie were but media of the same manifestation; acted charades, embodying the words of her prototype, the tender and susceptible daughter-in-law of Naomi: ‘Let me find favour in thy sight, my lord; for that thou hast comforted me, and for that thou hast spoken friendly unto thine handmaid.’

She was syringing the plants one wet day in the greenhouse. Knight was sitting under a great passion-flower observing the scene. Sometimes he looked out at the rain from the sky, and then at Elfride’s inner rain of larger drops, which fell from trees and shrubs, after having previously hung from the twigs like small silver fruit.

‘I must give you something to make you think of me during this autumn at your chambers,’ she was saying. ‘What shall it be? Portraits do more harm than good, by selecting the worst expression of which your face is capable. Hair is unlucky. And you don’t like jewellery.’

‘Something which shall bring back to my mind the many scenes we have enacted in this conservatory. I see what I should prize very much. That dwarf myrtle tree in the pot, which you have been so carefully tending.’

Elfride looked thoughtfully at the myrtle.

‘I can carry it comfortably in my hat box,’ said Knight. ‘And I will put it in my window, and so, it being always before my eyes, I shall think of you continually.’

It so happened that the myrtle which Knight had singled out had a peculiar beginning and history. It had originally been a twig worn in Stephen Smith's button-hole, and he had taken it thence, stuck it into the pot, and told her that if it grew, she was to take care of it, and keep it in remembrance of him when he was far away.

She looked wistfully at the plant, and a sense of fairness to Smith's memory caused her a pang of regret that Knight should have asked for that very one. It seemed exceeding a common heartlessness to let it go.

'Is there not anything you like better?' she said sadly. 'That is only an ordinary myrtle.'

'No: I am fond of myrtle.' Seeing that she did not take kindly to the idea, he said again, 'Why do you object to my having that?'

'Oh no — I don't object precisely — it was a feeling. — Ah, here's another cutting lately struck, and just as small — of a better kind, and with prettier leaves — myrtus microphylla.'

'That will do nicely. Let it be put in my room, that I may not forget it. What romance attaches to the other?'

'It was a gift to me.'

The subject then dropped. Knight thought no more of the matter till, on entering his bedroom in the evening, he found the second myrtle placed upon his dressing-table as he had directed. He stood for a moment admiring the fresh appearance of the leaves by candlelight, and then he thought of the transaction of the day.

Male lovers as well as female can be spoilt by too much kindness, and Elfride's uniform submissiveness had given Knight a rather exacting manner at crises, attached to her as he was. 'Why should she have refused the one I first chose?' he now asked himself. Even such slight opposition as she had shown then was exceptional enough to make itself noticeable. He was not vexed with her in the least: the mere variation of her way to-day from her usual ways kept him musing on the subject, because it perplexed him. 'It was a gift' — those were her words. Admitting it to be a gift, he thought she could hardly value a mere friend more than she valued him as a lover, and giving the plant into his charge would have made no difference. 'Except, indeed, it was the gift of a lover,' he murmured.

'I wonder if Elfride has ever had a lover before?' he said aloud, as a new idea, quite. This and companion thoughts were enough to occupy him completely till he fell asleep — rather later than usual.

The next day, when they were again alone, he said to her rather suddenly —

'Do you love me more or less, Elfie, for what I told you on board the steamer?'

'You told me so many things,' she returned, lifting her eyes to his and smiling.

'I mean the confession you coaxed out of me — that I had never been in the position of lover before.'

'It is a satisfaction, I suppose, to be the first in your heart,' she said to him, with an attempt to continue her smiling.

‘I am going to ask you a question now,’ said Knight, somewhat awkwardly. ‘I only ask it in a whimsical way, you know: not with great seriousness, Elfride. You may think it odd, perhaps.’

Elfride tried desperately to keep the colour in her face. She could not, though distressed to think that getting pale showed consciousness of deeper guilt than merely getting red.

‘Oh no — I shall not think that,’ she said, because obliged to say something to fill the pause which followed her questioner’s remark.

‘It is this: have you ever had a lover? I am almost sure you have not; but, have you?’

‘Not, as it were, a lover; I mean, not worth mentioning, Harry,’ she faltered.

Knight, overstrained in sentiment as he knew the feeling to be, felt some sickness of heart.

‘Still, he was a lover?’

‘Well, a sort of lover, I suppose,’ she responded tardily.

‘A man, I mean, you know.’

‘Yes; but only a mere person, and — — ’

‘But truly your lover?’

‘Yes; a lover certainly — he was that. Yes, he might have been called my lover.’

Knight said nothing to this for a minute or more, and kept silent time with his finger to the tick of the old library clock, in which room the colloquy was going on.

‘You don’t mind, Harry, do you?’ she said anxiously, nestling close to him, and watching his face.

‘Of course, I don’t seriously mind. In reason, a man cannot object to such a trifle. I only thought you hadn’t — that was all.’

However, one ray was abstracted from the glory about her head. But afterwards, when Knight was wandering by himself over the bare and breezy hills, and meditating on the subject, that ray suddenly returned. For she might have had a lover, and never have cared in the least for him. She might have used the word improperly, and meant ‘admirer’ all the time. Of course she had been admired; and one man might have made his admiration more prominent than that of the rest — a very natural case.

They were sitting on one of the garden seats when he found occasion to put the supposition to the test. ‘Did you love that lover or admirer of yours ever so little, Elfie?’

She murmured reluctantly, ‘Yes, I think I did.’

Knight felt the same faint touch of misery. ‘Only a very little?’ he said.

‘I am not sure how much.’

‘But you are sure, darling, you loved him a little?’

‘I think I am sure I loved him a little.’

‘And not a great deal, Elfie?’

‘My love was not supported by reverence for his powers.’

‘But, Elfride, did you love him deeply?’ said Knight restlessly.

‘I don’t exactly know how deep you mean by deeply.’

‘That’s nonsense.’

‘You misapprehend; and you have let go my hand!’ she cried, her eyes filling with tears. ‘Harry, don’t be severe with me, and don’t question me. I did not love him as I do you. And could it be deeply if I did not think him cleverer than myself? For I did not. You grieve me so much — you can’t think.’

‘I will not say another word about it.’

‘And you will not think about it, either, will you? I know you think of weaknesses in me after I am out of your sight; and not knowing what they are, I cannot combat them. I almost wish you were of a grosser nature, Harry; in truth I do! Or rather, I wish I could have the advantages such a nature in you would afford me, and yet have you as you are.’

‘What advantages would they be?’

‘Less anxiety, and more security. Ordinary men are not so delicate in their tastes as you; and where the lover or husband is not fastidious, and refined, and of a deep nature, things seem to go on better, I fancy — as far as I have been able to observe the world.’

‘Yes; I suppose it is right. Shallowness has this advantage, that you can’t be drowned there.’

‘But I think I’ll have you as you are; yes, I will!’ she said winsomely. ‘The practical husbands and wives who take things philosophically are very humdrum, are they not? Yes, it would kill me quite. You please me best as you are.’

‘Even though I wish you had never cared for one before me?’

‘Yes. And you must not wish it. Don’t!’

‘I’ll try not to, Elfride.’

So she hoped, but her heart was troubled. If he felt so deeply on this point, what would he say did he know all, and see it as Mrs. Jethway saw it? He would never make her the happiest girl in the world by taking her to be his own for aye. The thought enclosed her as a tomb whenever it presented itself to her perturbed brain. She tried to believe that Mrs. Jethway would never do her such a cruel wrong as to increase the bad appearance of her folly by innuendoes; and concluded that concealment, having been begun, must be persisted in, if possible. For what he might consider as bad as the fact, was her previous concealment of it by strategy.

But Elfride knew Mrs. Jethway to be her enemy, and to hate her. It was possible she would do her worst. And should she do it, all might be over.

Would the woman listen to reason, and be persuaded not to ruin one who had never intentionally harmed her?

It was night in the valley between Endelstow Craggs and the shore. The brook which trickled that way to the sea was distinct in its murmurs now, and over the line of its course there began to hang a white riband of fog. Against the sky, on the left hand of the vale, the black form of the church could be seen. On the other rose hazel-bushes, a few trees, and where these were absent, furze tufts — as tall as men — on stems nearly as stout as timber. The shriek of some bird was occasionally heard, as it flew

terror-stricken from its first roost, to seek a new sleeping-place, where it might pass the night unmolested.

In the evening shade, some way down the valley, and under a row of scrubby oaks, a cottage could still be discerned. It stood absolutely alone. The house was rather large, and the windows of some of the rooms were nailed up with boards on the outside, which gave a particularly deserted appearance to the whole erection. From the front door an irregular series of rough and misshapen steps, cut in the solid rock, led down to the edge of the streamlet, which, at their extremity, was hollowed into a basin through which the water trickled. This was evidently the means of water supply to the dweller or dwellers in the cottage.

A light footstep was heard descending from the higher slopes of the hillside. Indistinct in the pathway appeared a moving female shape, who advanced and knocked timidly at the door. No answer being returned the knock was repeated, with the same result, and it was then repeated a third time. This also was unsuccessful.

From one of the only two windows on the ground floor which were not boarded up came rays of light, no shutter or curtain obscuring the room from the eyes of a passer on the outside. So few walked that way after nightfall that any such means to secure secrecy were probably deemed unnecessary.

The inequality of the rays falling upon the trees outside told that the light had its origin in a flickering fire only. The visitor, after the third knocking, stepped a little to the left in order to gain a view of the interior, and threw back the hood from her face. The dancing yellow sheen revealed the fair and anxious countenance of Elfride.

Inside the house this firelight was enough to illumine the room distinctly, and to show that the furniture of the cottage was superior to what might have been expected from so unpromising an exterior. It also showed to Elfride that the room was empty. Beyond the light quiver and flap of the flames nothing moved or was audible therein.

She turned the handle and entered, throwing off the cloak which enveloped her, under which she appeared without hat or bonnet, and in the sort of half-toilette country people ordinarily dine in. Then advancing to the foot of the staircase she called distinctly, but somewhat fearfully, 'Mrs. Jethway!'

No answer.

With a look of relief and regret combined, denoting that ease came to the heart and disappointment to the brain, Elfride paused for several minutes, as if undecided how to act. Determining to wait, she sat down on a chair. The minutes drew on, and after sitting on the thorns of impatience for half an hour, she searched her pocket, took therefrom a letter, and tore off the blank leaf. Then taking out a pencil she wrote upon the paper:

'DEAR MRS. JETHWAY, — I have been to visit you. I wanted much to see you, but I cannot wait any longer. I came to beg you not to execute the threats you have repeated to me. Do not, I beseech you, Mrs. Jethway, let any one know I ran away from home! It would ruin me with him, and break my heart. I will do anything for you,

if you will be kind to me. In the name of our common womanhood, do not, I implore you, make a scandal of me. — Yours, E. SWANCOURT.'

She folded the note cornerwise, directed it, and placed it on the table. Then again drawing the hood over her curly head she emerged silently as she had come.

Whilst this episode had been in action at Mrs. Jethway's cottage, Knight had gone from the dining-room into the drawing-room, and found Mrs. Swancourt there alone.

'Elfride has vanished upstairs or somewhere,' she said.

'And I have been reading an article in an old number of the PRESENT that I lighted on by chance a short time ago; it is an article you once told us was yours. Well, Harry, with due deference to your literary powers, allow me to say that this effusion is all nonsense, in my opinion.'

'What is it about?' said Knight, taking up the paper and reading.

'There: don't get red about it. Own that experience has taught you to be more charitable. I have never read such unchivalrous sentiments in my life — from a man, I mean. There, I forgive you; it was before you knew Elfride.'

'Oh yes,' said Knight, looking up. 'I remember now. The text of that sermon was not my own at all, but was suggested to me by a young man named Smith — the same whom I have mentioned to you as coming from this parish. I thought the idea rather ingenious at the time, and enlarged it to the weight of a few guineas, because I had nothing else in my head.'

'Which idea do you call the text? I am curious to know that.'

'Well, this,' said Knight, somewhat unwillingly. 'That experience teaches, and your sweetheart, no less than your tailor, is necessarily very imperfect in her duties, if you are her first patron: and conversely, the sweetheart who is graceful under the initial kiss must be supposed to have had some practice in the trade.'

'And do you mean to say that you wrote that upon the strength of another man's remark, without having tested it by practice?'

'Yes — indeed I do.'

'Then I think it was uncalled for and unfair. And how do you know it is true? I expect you regret it now.'

'Since you bring me into a serious mood, I will speak candidly. I do believe that remark to be perfectly true, and, having written it, I would defend it anywhere. But I do often regret having ever written it, as well as others of the sort. I have grown older since, and I find such a tone of writing is calculated to do harm in the world. Every literary Jack becomes a gentleman if he can only pen a few indifferent satires upon womankind: women themselves, too, have taken to the trick; and so, upon the whole, I begin to be rather ashamed of my companions.'

'Ah, Henry, you have fallen in love since and it makes a difference,' said Mrs. Swancourt with a faint tone of banter.

'That's true; but that is not my reason.'

'Having found that, in a case of your own experience, a so-called goose was a swan, it seems absurd to deny such a possibility in other men's experiences.'

‘You can hit palpably, cousin Charlotte,’ said Knight. ‘You are like the boy who puts a stone inside his snowball, and I shall play with you no longer. Excuse me — I am going for my evening stroll.’

Though Knight had spoken jestingly, this incident and conversation had caused him a sudden depression. Coming, rather singularly, just after his discovery that Elfride had known what it was to love warmly before she had known him, his mind dwelt upon the subject, and the familiar pipe he smoked, whilst pacing up and down the shrubbery-path, failed to be a solace. He thought again of those idle words — hitherto quite forgotten — about the first kiss of a girl, and the theory seemed more than reasonable. Of course their sting now lay in their bearing on Elfride.

Elfride, under Knight’s kiss, had certainly been a very different woman from herself under Stephen’s. Whether for good or for ill, she had marvellously well learnt a betrothed lady’s part; and the fascinating finish of her deportment in this second campaign did probably arise from her unreserved encouragement of Stephen. Knight, with all the rapidity of jealous sensitiveness, pounced upon some words she had inadvertently let fall about an earring, which he had only partially understood at the time. It was during that ‘initial kiss’ by the little waterfall:

‘We must be careful. I lost the other by doing this!’

A flush which had in it as much of wounded pride as of sorrow, passed over Knight as he thought of what he had so frequently said to her in his simplicity. ‘I always meant to be the first comer in a woman’s heart, fresh lips or none for me.’ How childishly blind he must have seemed to this mere girl! How she must have laughed at him inwardly! He absolutely writhed as he thought of the confession she had wrung from him on the boat in the darkness of night. The one conception which had sustained his dignity when drawn out of his shell on that occasion — that of her charming ignorance of all such matters — how absurd it was!

This man, whose imagination had been fed up to preternatural size by lonely study and silent observations of his kind — whose emotions had been drawn out long and delicate by his seclusion, like plants in a cellar — was now absolutely in pain. Moreover, several years of poetic study, and, if the truth must be told, poetic efforts, had tended to develop the affective side of his constitution still further, in proportion to his active faculties. It was his belief in the absolute newness of blandishment to Elfride which had constituted her primary charm. He began to think it was as hard to be earliest in a woman’s heart as it was to be first in the Pool of Bethesda.

That Knight should have been thus constituted: that Elfride’s second lover should not have been one of the great mass of bustling mankind, little given to introspection, whose good-nature might have compensated for any lack of appreciativeness, was the chance of things. That her throbbing, self-confounding, indiscreet heart should have to defend itself unaided against the keen scrutiny and logical power which Knight, now that his suspicions were awakened, would sooner or later be sure to exercise against her, was her misfortune. A miserable incongruity was apparent in the circumstance of

a strong mind practising its unerring archery upon a heart which the owner of that mind loved better than his own.

Elfride's docile devotion to Knight was now its own enemy. Clinging to him so dependently, she taught him in time to presume upon that devotion — a lesson men are not slow to learn. A slight rebelliousness occasionally would have done him no harm, and would have been a world of advantage to her. But she idolized him, and was proud to be his bond-servant.

CHAPTER XXXI

'A worm i' the bud.'

One day the reviewer said, 'Let us go to the cliffs again, Elfride;' and, without consulting her wishes, he moved as if to start at once.

'The cliff of our dreadful adventure?' she inquired, with a shudder. 'Death stares me in the face in the person of that cliff.'

Nevertheless, so entirely had she sunk her individuality in his that the remark was not uttered as an expostulation, and she immediately prepared to accompany him.

'No, not that place,' said Knight. 'It is ghastly to me, too. That other, I mean; what is its name? — Windy Beak.'

Windy Beak was the second cliff in height along that coast, and, as is frequently the case with the natural features of the globe no less than with the intellectual features of men, it enjoyed the reputation of being the first. Moreover, it was the cliff to which Elfride had ridden with Stephen Smith, on a well-remembered morning of his summer visit.

So, though thought of the former cliff had caused her to shudder at the perils to which her lover and herself had there been exposed, by being associated with Knight only it was not so objectionable as Windy Beak. That place was worse than gloomy, it was a perpetual reproach to her.

But not liking to refuse, she said, 'It is further than the other cliff.'

'Yes; but you can ride.'

'And will you too?'

'No, I'll walk.'

A duplicate of her original arrangement with Stephen. Some fatality must be hanging over her head. But she ceased objecting.

'Very well, Harry, I'll ride,' she said meekly.

A quarter of an hour later she was in the saddle. But how different the mood from that of the former time. She had, indeed, given up her position as queen of the less to be vassal of the greater. Here was no showing off now; no scampering out of sight with Pansy, to perplex and tire her companion; no saucy remarks on LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI. Elfride was burdened with the very intensity of her love.

Knight did most of the talking along the journey. Elfride silently listened, and entirely resigned herself to the motions of the ambling horse upon which she sat, alternately rising and sinking gently, like a sea bird upon a sea wave.

When they had reached the limit of a quadruped's possibilities in walking, Knight tenderly lifted her from the saddle, tied the horse, and rambled on with her to the seat in the rock. Knight sat down, and drew Elfride deftly beside him, and they looked over the sea.

Two or three degrees above that melancholy and eternally level line, the ocean horizon, hung a sun of brass, with no visible rays, in a sky of ashen hue. It was a sky the sun did not illuminate or enkindle, as is usual at sunsets. This sheet of sky was met by the salt mass of gray water, flecked here and there with white. A waft of dampness occasionally rose to their faces, which was probably rarefied spray from the blows of the sea upon the foot of the cliff.

Elfride wished it could be a longer time ago that she had sat there with Stephen as her lover, and agreed to be his wife. The significant closeness of that time to the present was another item to add to the list of passionate fears which were chronic with her now.

Yet Knight was very tender this evening, and sustained her close to him as they sat.

Not a word had been uttered by either since sitting down, when Knight said musingly, looking still afar —

‘I wonder if any lovers in past years ever sat here with arms locked, as we do now. Probably they have, for the place seems formed for a seat.’

Her recollection of a well-known pair who had, and the much-talked-of loss which had ensued therefrom, and how the young man had been sent back to look for the missing article, led Elfride to glance down to her side, and behind her back. Many people who lose a trinket involuntarily give a momentary look for it in passing the spot ever so long afterwards. They do not often find it. Elfride, in turning her head, saw something shine weakly from a crevice in the rocky sedile. Only for a few minutes during the day did the sun light the alcove to its innermost rifts and slits, but these were the minutes now, and its level rays did Elfride the good or evil turn of revealing the lost ornament.

Elfride's thoughts instantly reverted to the words she had unintentionally uttered upon what had been going on when the earring was lost. And she was immediately seized with a misgiving that Knight, on seeing the object, would be reminded of her words. Her instinctive act therefore was to secure it privately.

It was so deep in the crack that Elfride could not pull it out with her hand, though she made several surreptitious trials.

‘What are you doing, Elfie?’ said Knight, noticing her attempts, and looking behind him likewise.

She had relinquished the endeavour, but too late.

Knight peered into the joint from which her hand had been withdrawn, and saw what she had seen. He instantly took a penknife from his pocket, and by dint of probing and scraping brought the earring out upon open ground.

‘It is not yours, surely?’ he inquired.

‘Yes, it is,’ she said quietly.

‘Well, that is a most extraordinary thing, that we should find it like this!’ Knight then remembered more circumstances; ‘What, is it the one you have told me of?’

‘Yes.’

The unfortunate remark of hers at the kiss came into his mind, if eyes were ever an index to be trusted. Trying to repress the words he yet spoke on the subject, more to obtain assurance that what it had seemed to imply was not true than from a wish to pry into by-gones.

‘Were you really engaged to be married to that lover?’ he said, looking straight forward at the sea again.

‘Yes — but not exactly. Yet I think I was.’

‘O Elfride, engaged to be married!’ he murmured.

‘It would have been called a — secret engagement, I suppose. But don’t look so disappointed; don’t blame me.’

‘No, no.’

‘Why do you say “No, no,” in such a way? Sweetly enough, but so barely?’

Knight made no direct reply to this. ‘Elfride, I told you once,’ he said, following out his thoughts, ‘that I never kissed a woman as a sweetheart until I kissed you. A kiss is not much, I suppose, and it happens to few young people to be able to avoid all blandishments and attentions except from the one they afterwards marry. But I have peculiar weaknesses, Elfride; and because I have led a peculiar life, I must suffer for it, I suppose. I had hoped — well, what I had no right to hope in connection with you. You naturally granted your former lover the privileges you grant me.’

A ‘yes’ came from her like the last sad whisper of a breeze.

‘And he used to kiss you — of course he did.’

‘Yes.’

‘And perhaps you allowed him a more free manner in his love-making than I have shown in mine.’

‘No, I did not.’ This was rather more alertly spoken.

‘But he adopted it without being allowed?’

‘Yes.’

‘How much I have made of you, Elfride, and how I have kept aloof!’ said Knight in deep and shaken tones. ‘So many days and hours as I have hoped in you — I have feared to kiss you more than those two times. And he made no scruples to...’

She crept closer to him and trembled as if with cold. Her dread that the whole story, with random additions, would become known to him, caused her manner to be so agitated that Knight was alarmed and perplexed into stillness. The actual innocence which made her think so fearfully of what, as the world goes, was not a great matter,

magnified her apparent guilt. It may have said to Knight that a woman who was so flurried in the preliminaries must have a dreadful sequel to her tale.

'I know,' continued Knight, with an indescribable drag of manner and intonation, — 'I know I am absurdly scrupulous about you — that I want you too exclusively mine. In your past before you knew me — from your very cradle — I wanted to think you had been mine. I would make you mine by main force. Elfride,' he went on vehemently, 'I can't help this jealousy over you! It is my nature, and must be so, and I HATE the fact that you have been caressed before: yes hate it!'

She drew a long deep breath, which was half a sob. Knight's face was hard, and he never looked at her at all, still fixing his gaze far out to sea, which the sun had now resigned to the shade. In high places it is not long from sunset to night, dusk being in a measure banished, and though only evening where they sat, it had been twilight in the valleys for half an hour. Upon the dull expanse of sea there gradually intensified itself into existence the gleam of a distant light-ship.

'When that lover first kissed you, Elfride was it in such a place as this?'

'Yes, it was.'

'You don't tell me anything but what I wring out of you. Why is that? Why have you suppressed all mention of this when casual confidences of mine should have suggested confidence in return? On board the Juliet, why were you so secret? It seems like being made a fool of, Elfride, to think that, when I was teaching you how desirable it was that we should have no secrets from each other, you were assenting in words, but in act contradicting me. Confidence would have been so much more promising for our happiness. If you had had confidence in me, and told me willingly, I should — be different. But you suppress everything, and I shall question you. Did you live at Endelstow at that time?'

'Yes,' she said faintly.

'Where were you when he first kissed you?'

'Sitting in this seat.'

'Ah, I thought so!' said Knight, rising and facing her.

'And that accounts for everything — the exclamation which you explained deceitfully, and all! Forgive the harsh word, Elfride — forgive it.' He smiled a surface smile as he continued: 'What a poor mortal I am to play second fiddle in everything and to be deluded by fibs!'

'Oh, don't say it; don't, Harry!'

'Where did he kiss you besides here?'

'Sitting on — a tomb in the — churchyard — and other places,' she answered with slow recklessness.

'Never mind, never mind,' he exclaimed, on seeing her tears and perturbation. 'I don't want to grieve you. I don't care.'

But Knight did care.

'It makes no difference, you know,' he continued, seeing she did not reply.

'I feel cold,' said Elfride. 'Shall we go home?'

‘Yes; it is late in the year to sit long out of doors: we ought to be off this ledge before it gets too dark to let us see our footing. I daresay the horse is impatient.’

Knight spoke the merest commonplace to her now. He had hoped to the last moment that she would have volunteered the whole story of her first attachment. It grew more and more distasteful to him that she should have a secret of this nature. Such entire confidence as he had pictured as about to exist between himself and the innocent young wife who had known no lover’s tones save his — was this its beginning? He lifted her upon the horse, and they went along constrainedly. The poison of suspicion was doing its work well.

An incident occurred on this homeward journey which was long remembered by both, as adding shade to shadow. Knight could not keep from his mind the words of Adam’s reproach to Eve in PARADISE LOST, and at last whispered them to himself

‘Fool’d and beguiled: by him thou, I by thee!’

‘What did you say?’ Elfride inquired timorously.

‘It was only a quotation.’

They had now dropped into a hollow, and the church tower made its appearance against the pale evening sky, its lower part being hidden by some intervening trees. Elfride, being denied an answer, was looking at the tower and trying to think of some contrasting quotation she might use to regain his tenderness. After a little thought she said in winning tones —

“Thou hast been my hope, and a strong tower for me against the enemy.”

They passed on. A few minutes later three or four birds were seen to fly out of the tower.

‘The strong tower moves,’ said Knight, with surprise.

A corner of the square mass swayed forward, sank, and vanished. A loud rumble followed, and a cloud of dust arose where all had previously been so clear.

‘The church restorers have done it!’ said Elfride.

At this minute Mr. Swancourt was seen approaching them. He came up with a bustling demeanour, apparently much engrossed by some business in hand.

‘We have got the tower down!’ he exclaimed. ‘It came rather quicker than we intended it should. The first idea was to take it down stone by stone, you know. In doing this the crack widened considerably, and it was not believed safe for the men to stand upon the walls any longer. Then we decided to undermine it, and three men set to work at the weakest corner this afternoon. They had left off for the evening, intending to give the final blow to-morrow morning, and had been home about half an hour, when down it came. A very successful job — a very fine job indeed. But he was a tough old fellow in spite of the crack.’ Here Mr. Swancourt wiped from his face the perspiration his excitement had caused him.

‘Poor old tower!’ said Elfride.

‘Yes, I am sorry for it,’ said Knight. ‘It was an interesting piece of antiquity — a local record of local art.’

‘Ah, but my dear sir, we shall have a new one, expostulated Mr. Swancourt; ‘a splendid tower — designed by a first-rate London man — in the newest style of Gothic art, and full of Christian feeling.’

‘Indeed!’ said Knight.

‘Oh yes. Not in the barbarous clumsy architecture of this neighbourhood; you see nothing so rough and pagan anywhere else in England. When the men are gone, I would advise you to go and see the church before anything further is done to it. You can now sit in the chancel, and look down the nave through the west arch, and through that far out to sea. In fact,’ said Mr. Swancourt significantly, ‘if a wedding were performed at the altar to-morrow morning, it might be witnessed from the deck of a ship on a voyage to the South Seas, with a good glass. However, after dinner, when the moon has risen, go up and see for yourselves.’

Knight assented with feverish readiness. He had decided within the last few minutes that he could not rest another night without further talk with Elfride upon the subject which now divided them: he was determined to know all, and relieve his disquiet in some way. Elfride would gladly have escaped further converse alone with him that night, but it seemed inevitable.

Just after moonrise they left the house. How little any expectation of the moonlight prospect — which was the ostensible reason of their pilgrimage — had to do with Knight’s real motive in getting the gentle girl again upon his arm, Elfride no less than himself well knew.

CHAPTER XXXII

‘Had I wist before I kist’

It was now October, and the night air was chill. After looking to see that she was well wrapped up, Knight took her along the hillside path they had ascended so many times in each other’s company, when doubt was a thing unknown. On reaching the church they found that one side of the tower was, as the vicar had stated, entirely removed, and lying in the shape of rubbish at their feet. The tower on its eastern side still was firm, and might have withstood the shock of storms and the siege of battering years for many a generation even now. They entered by the side-door, went eastward, and sat down by the altar-steps.

The heavy arch spanning the junction of tower and nave formed to-night a black frame to a distant misty view, stretching far westward. Just outside the arch came the heap of fallen stones, then a portion of moonlit churchyard, then the wide and convex sea behind. It was a coup-d’oeil which had never been possible since the mediaeval masons first attached the old tower to the older church it dignified, and hence must be supposed to have had an interest apart from that of simple moonlight on ancient wall and sea and shore — any mention of which has by this time, it is to be feared, become one of the cuckoo-cries which are heard but not regarded. Rays of crimson,

blue, and purple shone upon the twain from the east window behind them, wherein saints and angels vied with each other in primitive surroundings of landscape and sky, and threw upon the pavement at the sitters' feet a softer reproduction of the same translucent hues, amid which the shadows of the two living heads of Knight and Elfride were opaque and prominent blots. Presently the moon became covered by a cloud, and the iridescence died away.

'There, it is gone!' said Knight. 'I've been thinking, Elfride, that this place we sit on is where we may hope to kneel together soon. But I am restless and uneasy, and you know why.'

Before she replied the moonlight returned again, irradiating that portion of churchyard within their view. It brightened the near part first, and against the background which the cloud-shadow had not yet uncovered stood, brightest of all, a white tomb — the tomb of young Jethway.

Knight, still alive on the subject of Elfride's secret, thought of her words concerning the kiss that it once had occurred on a tomb in this churchyard.

'Elfride,' he said, with a superficial archness which did not half cover an undercurrent of reproach, 'do you know, I think you might have told me voluntarily about that past — of kisses and betrothing — without giving me so much uneasiness and trouble. Was that the tomb you alluded to as having sat on with him?'

She waited an instant. 'Yes,' she said.

The correctness of his random shot startled Knight; though, considering that almost all the other memorials in the churchyard were upright headstones upon which nobody could possibly sit, it was not so wonderful.

Elfride did not even now go on with the explanation her exacting lover wished to have, and her reticence began to irritate him as before. He was inclined to read her a lecture.

'Why don't you tell me all?' he said somewhat indignantly. 'Elfride, there is not a single subject upon which I feel more strongly than upon this — that everything ought to be cleared up between two persons before they become husband and wife. See how desirable and wise such a course is, in order to avoid disagreeable contingencies in the form of discoveries afterwards. For, Elfride, a secret of no importance at all may be made the basis of some fatal misunderstanding only because it is discovered, and not confessed. They say there never was a couple of whom one had not some secret the other never knew or was intended to know. This may or may not be true; but if it be true, some have been happy in spite rather than in consequence of it. If a man were to see another man looking significantly at his wife, and she were blushing crimson and appearing startled, do you think he would be so well satisfied with, for instance, her truthful explanation that once, to her great annoyance, she accidentally fainted into his arms, as if she had said it voluntarily long ago, before the circumstance occurred which forced it from her? Suppose that admirer you spoke of in connection with the

tomb yonder should turn up, and bother me. It would embitter our lives, if I were then half in the dark, as I am now!

Knight spoke the latter sentences with growing force.

'It cannot be,' she said.

'Why not?' he asked sharply.

Elfride was distressed to find him in so stern a mood, and she trembled. In a confusion of ideas, probably not intending a wilful prevarication, she answered hurriedly —

'If he's dead, how can you meet him?'

'Is he dead? Oh, that's different altogether!' said Knight, immensely relieved. 'But, let me see — what did you say about that tomb and him?'

'That's his tomb,' she continued faintly.

'What! was he who lies buried there the man who was your lover?' Knight asked in a distinct voice.

'Yes; and I didn't love him or encourage him.'

'But you let him kiss you — you said so, you know, Elfride.'

She made no reply.

'Why,' said Knight, recollecting circumstances by degrees, 'you surely said you were in some degree engaged to him — and of course you were if he kissed you. And now you say you never encouraged him. And I have been fancying you said — I am almost sure you did — that you were sitting with him ON that tomb. Good God!' he cried, suddenly starting up in anger, 'are you telling me untruths? Why should you play with me like this? I'll have the right of it. Elfride, we shall never be happy! There's a blight upon us, or me, or you, and it must be cleared off before we marry.' Knight moved away impetuously as if to leave her.

She jumped up and clutched his arm

'Don't go, Harry — don't!

'Tell me, then,' said Knight sternly. 'And remember this, no more fibs, or, upon my soul, I shall hate you. Heavens! that I should come to this, to be made a fool of by a girl's untruths — —'

'Don't, don't treat me so cruelly! O Harry, Harry, have pity, and withdraw those dreadful words! I am truthful by nature — I am — and I don't know how I came to make you misunderstand! But I was frightened!' She quivered so in her perturbation that she shook him with her {Note: sentence incomplete in text.}

'Did you say you were sitting on that tomb?' he asked moodily.

'Yes; and it was true.'

'Then how, in the name of Heaven, can a man sit upon his own tomb?'

'That was another man. Forgive me, Harry, won't you?'

'What, a lover in the tomb and a lover on it?'

'Oh — Oh — yes!'

'Then there were two before me?'

'I — suppose so.'

‘Now, don’t be a silly woman with your supposing — I hate all that,’ said Knight contemptuously almost. ‘Well, we learn strange things. I don’t know what I might have done — no man can say into what shape circumstances may warp him — but I hardly think I should have had the conscience to accept the favours of a new lover whilst sitting over the poor remains of the old one; upon my soul, I don’t.’ Knight, in moody meditation, continued looking towards the tomb, which stood staring them in the face like an avenging ghost.

‘But you wrong me — Oh, so grievously!’ she cried. ‘I did not meditate any such thing: believe me, Harry, I did not. It only happened so — quite of itself.’

‘Well, I suppose you didn’t INTEND such a thing,’ he said. ‘Nobody ever does,’ he sadly continued.

‘And him in the grave I never once loved.’

‘I suppose the second lover and you, as you sat there, vowed to be faithful to each other for ever?’

Elfride only replied by quick heavy breaths, showing she was on the brink of a sob.

‘You don’t choose to be anything but reserved, then?’ he said imperatively.

‘Of course we did,’ she responded.

‘“Of course!” You seem to treat the subject very lightly?’

‘It is past, and is nothing to us now.’

‘Elfride, it is a nothing which, though it may make a careless man laugh, cannot but make a genuine one grieve. It is a very gnawing pain. Tell me straight through — all of it.’

‘Never. O Harry! how can you expect it when so little of it makes you so harsh with me?’

‘Now, Elfride, listen to this. You know that what you have told only jars the subtler fancies in one, after all. The feeling I have about it would be called, and is, mere sentimentality; and I don’t want you to suppose that an ordinary previous engagement of a straightforward kind would make any practical difference in my love, or my wish to make you my wife. But you seem to have more to tell, and that’s where the wrong is. Is there more?’

‘Not much more,’ she wearily answered.

Knight preserved a grave silence for a minute. ‘“Not much more,”’ he said at last. ‘I should think not, indeed!’ His voice assumed a low and steady pitch. ‘Elfride, you must not mind my saying a strange-sounding thing, for say it I shall. It is this: that if there WERE much more to add to an account which already includes all the particulars that a broken marriage engagement could possibly include with propriety, it must be some exceptional thing which might make it impossible for me or any one else to love you and marry you.’

Knight’s disturbed mood led him much further than he would have gone in a quieter moment. And, even as it was, had she been assertive to any degree he would not have been so peremptory; and had she been a stronger character — more practical and less imaginative — she would have made more use of her position in his heart to influence

him. But the confiding tenderness which had won him is ever accompanied by a sort of self-committal to the stream of events, leading every such woman to trust more to the kindness of fate for good results than to any argument of her own.

‘Well, well,’ he murmured cynically; ‘I won’t say it is your fault: it is my ill-luck, I suppose. I had no real right to question you — everybody would say it was presuming. But when we have misunderstood, we feel injured by the subject of our misunderstanding. You never said you had had nobody else here making love to you, so why should I blame you? Elfride, I beg your pardon.’

‘No, no! I would rather have your anger than that cool aggrieved politeness. Do drop that, Harry! Why should you inflict that upon me? It reduces me to the level of a mere acquaintance.’

‘You do that with me. Why not confidence for confidence?’

‘Yes; but I didn’t ask you a single question with regard to your past: I didn’t wish to know about it. All I cared for was that, wherever you came from, whatever you had done, whoever you had loved, you were mine at last. Harry, if originally you had known I had loved, would you never have cared for me?’

‘I won’t quite say that. Though I own that the idea of your inexperienced state had a great charm for me. But I think this: that if I had known there was any phase of your past love you would refuse to reveal if I asked to know it, I should never have loved you.’

Elfride sobbed bitterly. ‘Am I such a — mere characterless toy — as to have no attraction in me, apart from — freshness? Haven’t I brains? You said — I was clever and ingenious in my thoughts, and — isn’t that anything? Have I not some beauty? I think I have a little — and I know I have — yes, I do! You have praised my voice, and my manner, and my accomplishments. Yet all these together are so much rubbish because I — accidentally saw a man before you!’

‘Oh, come, Elfride. “Accidentally saw a man” is very cool. You loved him, remember.’ — ‘And loved him a little!’

‘And refuse now to answer the simple question how it ended. Do you refuse still, Elfride?’

‘You have no right to question me so — you said so. It is unfair. Trust me as I trust you.’

‘That’s not at all.’

‘I shall not love you if you are so cruel. It is cruel to me to argue like this.’

‘Perhaps it is. Yes, it is. I was carried away by my feeling for you. Heaven knows that I didn’t mean to; but I have loved you so that I have used you badly.’

‘I don’t mind it, Harry!’ she instantly answered, creeping up and nestling against him; ‘and I will not think at all that you used me harshly if you will forgive me, and not be vexed with me any more? I do wish I had been exactly as you thought I was, but I could not help it, you know. If I had only known you had been coming, what a nunnery I would have lived in to have been good enough for you!’

‘Well, never mind,’ said Knight; and he turned to go. He endeavoured to speak sportively as they went on. ‘Diogenes Laertius says that philosophers used voluntarily to deprive themselves of sight to be uninterrupted in their meditations. Men, becoming lovers, ought to do the same thing.’

‘Why? — but never mind — I don’t want to know. Don’t speak laconically to me,’ she said with deprecation.

‘Why? Because they would never then be distracted by discovering their idol was second-hand.’

She looked down and sighed; and they passed out of the crumbling old place, and slowly crossed to the churchyard entrance. Knight was not himself, and he could not pretend to be. She had not told all.

He supported her lightly over the stile, and was practically as attentive as a lover could be. But there had passed away a glory, and the dream was not as it had been of yore. Perhaps Knight was not shaped by Nature for a marrying man. Perhaps his lifelong constraint towards women, which he had attributed to accident, was not chance after all, but the natural result of instinctive acts so minute as to be undiscernible even by himself. Or whether the rough dispelling of any bright illusion, however imaginative, depreciates the real and unexaggerated brightness which appertains to its basis, one cannot say. Certain it was that Knight’s disappointment at finding himself second or third in the field, at Elfride’s momentary equivocal, and at her reluctance to be candid, brought him to the verge of cynicism.

CHAPTER XXXIII

‘O daughter of Babylon, wasted with misery.’

A habit of Knight’s, when not immediately occupied with Elfride — to walk by himself for half an hour or so between dinner and bedtime — had become familiar to his friends at Endelstow, Elfride herself among them. When he had helped her over the stile, she said gently, ‘If you wish to take your usual turn on the hill, Harry, I can run down to the house alone.’

‘Thank you, Elfie; then I think I will.’

Her form diminished to blackness in the moonlight, and Knight, after remaining upon the churchyard stile a few minutes longer, turned back again towards the building. His usual course was now to light a cigar or pipe, and indulge in a quiet meditation. But to-night his mind was too tense to bethink itself of such a solace. He merely walked round to the site of the fallen tower, and sat himself down upon some of the large stones which had composed it until this day, when the chain of circumstance originated by Stephen Smith, while in the employ of Mr. Hewby, the London man of art, had brought about its overthrow.

Pondering on the possible episodes of Elfride’s past life, and on how he had supposed her to have had no past justifying the name, he sat and regarded the white tomb of

young Jethway, now close in front of him. The sea, though comparatively placid, could as usual be heard from this point along the whole distance between promontories to the right and left, floundering and entangling itself among the insulated stacks of rock which dotted the water's edge — the miserable skeletons of tortured old cliffs that would not even yet succumb to the wear and tear of the tides.

As a change from thoughts not of a very cheerful kind, Knight attempted exertion. He stood up, and prepared to ascend to the summit of the ruinous heap of stones, from which a more extended outlook was obtainable than from the ground. He stretched out his arm to seize the projecting arris of a larger block than ordinary, and so help himself up, when his hand lighted plump upon a substance differing in the greatest possible degree from what he had expected to seize — hard stone. It was stringy and entangled, and trailed upon the stone. The deep shadow from the aisle wall prevented his seeing anything here distinctly, and he began guessing as a necessity. 'It is a tressy species of moss or lichen,' he said to himself.

But it lay loosely over the stone.

'It is a tuft of grass,' he said.

But it lacked the roughness and humidity of the finest grass.

'It is a mason's whitewash-brush.'

Such brushes, he remembered, were more bristly; and however much used in repairing a structure, would not be required in pulling one down.

He said, 'It must be a thready silk fringe.'

He felt further in. It was somewhat warm. Knight instantly felt somewhat cold.

To find the coldness of inanimate matter where you expect warmth is startling enough; but a colder temperature than that of the body being rather the rule than the exception in common substances, it hardly conveys such a shock to the system as finding warmth where utter frigidity is anticipated.

'God only knows what it is,' he said.

He felt further, and in the course of a minute put his hand upon a human head. The head was warm, but motionless. The thready mass was the hair of the head — long and straggling, showing that the head was a woman's.

Knight in his perplexity stood still for a moment, and collected his thoughts. The vicar's account of the fall of the tower was that the workmen had been undermining it all the day, and had left in the evening intending to give the finishing stroke the next morning. Half an hour after they had gone the undermined angle came down. The woman who was half buried, as it seemed, must have been beneath it at the moment of the fall.

Knight leapt up and began endeavouring to remove the rubbish with his hands. The heap overlying the body was for the most part fine and dusty, but in immense quantity. It would be a saving of time to run for assistance. He crossed to the churchyard wall, and hastened down the hill.

A little way down an intersecting road passed over a small ridge, which now showed up darkly against the moon, and this road here formed a kind of notch in the sky-line.

At the moment that Knight arrived at the crossing he beheld a man on this eminence, coming towards him. Knight turned aside and met the stranger.

‘There has been an accident at the church,’ said Knight, without preface. ‘The tower has fallen on somebody, who has been lying there ever since. Will you come and help?’

‘That I will,’ said the man.

‘It is a woman,’ said Knight, as they hurried back, ‘and I think we two are enough to extricate her. Do you know of a shovel?’

‘The grave-digging shovels are about somewhere. They used to stay in the tower.’

‘And there must be some belonging to the workmen.’

They searched about, and in an angle of the porch found three carefully stowed away. Going round to the west end Knight signified the spot of the tragedy.

‘We ought to have brought a lantern,’ he exclaimed. ‘But we may be able to do without.’ He set to work removing the superincumbent mass.

The other man, who looked on somewhat helplessly at first, now followed the example of Knight’s activity, and removed the larger stones which were mingled with the rubbish. But with all their efforts it was quite ten minutes before the body of the unfortunate creature could be extricated. They lifted her as carefully as they could, breathlessly carried her to Felix Jethway’s tomb, which was only a few steps westward, and laid her thereon.

‘Is she dead indeed?’ said the stranger.

‘She appears to be,’ said Knight. ‘Which is the nearest house? The vicarage, I suppose.’

‘Yes; but since we shall have to call a surgeon from Castle Boterel, I think it would be better to carry her in that direction, instead of away from the town.’

‘And is it not much further to the first house we come to going that way, than to the vicarage or to The Crag?’

‘Not much,’ the stranger replied.

‘Suppose we take her there, then. And I think the best way to do it would be thus, if you don’t mind joining hands with me.’

‘Not in the least; I am glad to assist.’

Making a kind of cradle, by clasping their hands crosswise under the inanimate woman, they lifted her, and walked on side by side down a path indicated by the stranger, who appeared to know the locality well.

‘I had been sitting in the church for nearly an hour,’ Knight resumed, when they were out of the churchyard. ‘Afterwards I walked round to the site of the fallen tower, and so found her. It is painful to think I unconsciously wasted so much time in the very presence of a perishing, flying soul.’

‘The tower fell at dusk, did it not? quite two hours ago, I think?’

‘Yes. She must have been there alone. What could have been her object in visiting the churchyard then?’

‘It is difficult to say.’ The stranger looked inquiringly into the reclining face of the motionless form they bore. ‘Would you turn her round for a moment, so that the light shines on her face?’ he said.

They turned her face to the moon, and the man looked closer into her features. ‘Why, I know her!’ he exclaimed.

‘Who is she?’

‘Mrs. Jethway. And the cottage we are taking her to is her own. She is a widow; and I was speaking to her only this afternoon. I was at Castle Boterel post-office, and she came there to post a letter. Poor soul! Let us hurry on.’

‘Hold my wrist a little tighter. Was not that tomb we laid her on the tomb of her only son?’

‘Yes, it was. Yes, I see it now. She was there to visit the tomb. Since the death of that son she has been a desolate, desponding woman, always bewailing him. She was a farmer’s wife, very well educated — a governess originally, I believe.’

Knight’s heart was moved to sympathy. His own fortunes seemed in some strange way to be interwoven with those of this Jethway family, through the influence of Elfride over himself and the unfortunate son of that house. He made no reply, and they still walked on.

‘She begins to feel heavy,’ said the stranger, breaking the silence.

‘Yes, she does,’ said Knight; and after another pause added, ‘I think I have met you before, though where I cannot recollect. May I ask who you are?’

‘Oh yes. I am Lord Luxellian. Who are you?’

‘I am a visitor at The Craggs — Mr. Knight.’

‘I have heard of you, Mr. Knight.’

‘And I of you, Lord Luxellian. I am glad to meet you.’

‘I may say the same. I am familiar with your name in print.’

‘And I with yours. Is this the house?’

‘Yes.’

The door was locked. Knight, reflecting a moment, searched the pocket of the lifeless woman, and found therein a large key which, on being applied to the door, opened it easily. The fire was out, but the moonlight entered the quarried window, and made patterns upon the floor. The rays enabled them to see that the room into which they had entered was pretty well furnished, it being the same room that Elfride had visited alone two or three evenings earlier. They deposited their still burden on an old-fashioned couch which stood against the wall, and Knight searched about for a lamp or candle. He found a candle on a shelf, lighted it, and placed it on the table.

Both Knight and Lord Luxellian examined the pale countenance attentively, and both were nearly convinced that there was no hope. No marks of violence were visible in the casual examination they made.

‘I think that as I know where Doctor Granson lives,’ said Lord Luxellian, ‘I had better run for him whilst you stay here.’

Knight agreed to this. Lord Luxellian then went off, and his hurrying footsteps died away. Knight continued bending over the body, and a few minutes longer of careful scrutiny perfectly satisfied him that the woman was far beyond the reach of the lancet and the drug. Her extremities were already beginning to get stiff and cold. Knight covered her face, and sat down.

The minutes went by. The essayist remained musing on all the occurrences of the night. His eyes were directed upon the table, and he had seen for some time that writing-materials were spread upon it. He now noticed these more particularly: there were an inkstand, pen, blotting-book, and note-paper. Several sheets of paper were thrust aside from the rest, upon which letters had been begun and relinquished, as if their form had not been satisfactory to the writer. A stick of black sealing-wax and seal were there too, as if the ordinary fastening had not been considered sufficiently secure. The abandoned sheets of paper lying as they did open upon the table, made it possible, as he sat, to read the few words written on each. One ran thus:

‘SIR, — As a woman who was once blest with a dear son of her own, I implore you to accept a warning — — ’

Another:

‘SIR, — If you will deign to receive warning from a stranger before it is too late to alter your course, listen to — — ’

The third:

‘SIR, — With this letter I enclose to you another which, unaided by any explanation from me, tells a startling tale. I wish, however, to add a few words to make your delusion yet more clear to you — — ’

It was plain that, after these renounced beginnings, a fourth letter had been written and despatched, which had been deemed a proper one. Upon the table were two drops of sealing-wax, the stick from which they were taken having been laid down overhanging the edge of the table; the end of it drooped, showing that the wax was placed there whilst warm. There was the chair in which the writer had sat, the impression of the letter’s address upon the blotting-paper, and the poor widow who had caused these results lying dead hard by. Knight had seen enough to lead him to the conclusion that Mrs. Jethway, having matter of great importance to communicate to some friend or acquaintance, had written him a very careful letter, and gone herself to post it; that she had not returned to the house from that time of leaving it till Lord Luxellian and himself had brought her back dead.

The unutterable melancholy of the whole scene, as he waited on, silent and alone, did not altogether clash with the mood of Knight, even though he was the affianced of a fair and winning girl, and though so lately he had been in her company. Whilst sitting on the remains of the demolished tower he had defined a new sensation; that the lengthened course of inaction he had lately been indulging in on Elfride’s account might probably not be good for him as a man who had work to do. It could quickly be put an end to by hastening on his marriage with her.

Knight, in his own opinion, was one who had missed his mark by excessive aiming. Having now, to a great extent, given up ideal ambitions, he wished earnestly to direct his powers into a more practical channel, and thus correct the introspective tendencies which had never brought himself much happiness, or done his fellow-creatures any great good. To make a start in this new direction by marriage, which, since knowing Elfride, had been so entrancing an idea, was less exquisite to-night. That the curtailment of his illusion regarding her had something to do with the reaction, and with the return of his old sentiments on wasting time, is more than probable. Though Knight's heart had so greatly mastered him, the mastery was not so complete as to be easily maintained in the face of a moderate intellectual revival.

His reverie was broken by the sound of wheels, and a horse's tramp. The door opened to admit the surgeon, Lord Luxellian, and a Mr. Coole, coroner for the division (who had been attending at Castle Boterel that very day, and was having an after-dinner chat with the doctor when Lord Luxellian arrived); next came two female nurses and some idlers.

Mr. Granson, after a cursory examination, pronounced the woman dead from suffocation, induced by intense pressure on the respiratory organs; and arrangements were made that the inquiry should take place on the following morning, before the return of the coroner to St. Launce's.

Shortly afterwards the house of the widow was deserted by all its living occupants, and she abode in death, as she had in her life during the past two years, entirely alone.

CHAPTER XXXIV

'Yea, happy shall he be that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us.'

Sixteen hours had passed. Knight was entering the ladies' boudoir at The Crag, upon his return from attending the inquest touching the death of Mrs. Jethway. Elfride was not in the apartment.

Mrs. Swancourt made a few inquiries concerning the verdict and collateral circumstances. Then she said —

'The postman came this morning the minute after you left the house. There was only one letter for you, and I have it here.'

She took a letter from the lid of her workbox, and handed it to him. Knight took the missive abstractedly, but struck by its appearance murmured a few words and left the room.

The letter was fastened with a black seal, and the handwriting in which it was addressed had lain under his eyes, long and prominently, only the evening before.

Knight was greatly agitated, and looked about for a spot where he might be secure from interruption. It was the season of heavy dews, which lay on the herbage in shady places all the day long; nevertheless, he entered a small patch of neglected grass-plot

enclosed by the shrubbery, and there perused the letter, which he had opened on his way thither.

The handwriting, the seal, the paper, the introductory words, all had told on the instant that the letter had come to him from the hands of the widow Jethway, now dead and cold. He had instantly understood that the unfinished notes which caught his eye yesternight were intended for nobody but himself. He had remembered some of the words of Elfride in her sleep on the steamer, that somebody was not to tell him of something, or it would be her ruin — a circumstance hitherto deemed so trivial and meaningless that he had well-nigh forgotten it. All these things infused into him an emotion intense in power and supremely distressing in quality. The paper in his hand quivered as he read:

‘THE VALLEY, ENDELSTOW.

‘SIR, — A woman who has not much in the world to lose by any censure this act may bring upon her, wishes to give you some hints concerning a lady you love. If you will deign to accept a warning before it is too late, you will notice what your correspondent has to say.

‘You are deceived. Can such a woman as this be worthy?

‘One who encouraged an honest youth to love her, then slighted him, so that he died.

‘One who next took a man of no birth as a lover, who was forbidden the house by her father.

‘One who secretly left her home to be married to that man, met him, and went with him to London.

‘One who, for some reason or other, returned again unmarried.

‘One who, in her after-correspondence with him, went so far as to address him as her husband.

‘One who wrote the enclosed letter to ask me, who better than anybody else knows the story, to keep the scandal a secret.

‘I hope soon to be beyond the reach of either blame or praise. But before removing me God has put it in my power to avenge the death of my son.

‘GERTRUDE JETHWAY.’

The letter enclosed was the note in pencil that Elfride had written in Mrs. Jethway’s cottage:

‘DEAR MRS. JETHWAY, — I have been to visit you. I wanted much to see you, but I cannot wait any longer. I came to beg you not to execute the threats you have repeated to me. Do not, I beseech you, Mrs. Jethway, let any one know I ran away from home! It would ruin me with him, and break my heart. I will do anything for you, if you will be kind to me. In the name of our common womanhood, do not, I implore you, make a scandal of me. — Yours,

‘E. SWANCOURT.

Knight turned his head wearily towards the house. The ground rose rapidly on nearing the shrubbery in which he stood, raising it almost to a level with the first

floor of The Crag. Elfride's dressing-room lay in the salient angle in this direction, and it was lighted by two windows in such a position that, from Knight's standing-place, his sight passed through both windows, and raked the room. Elfride was there; she was pausing between the two windows, looking at her figure in the cheval-glass. She regarded herself long and attentively in front; turned, flung back her head, and observed the reflection over her shoulder.

Nobody can predicate as to her object or fancy; she may have done the deed in the very abstraction of deep sadness. She may have been moaning from the bottom of her heart, 'How unhappy am I!' But the impression produced on Knight was not a good one. He dropped his eyes moodily. The dead woman's letter had a virtue in the accident of its juncture far beyond any it intrinsically exhibited. Circumstance lent to evil words a ring of pitiless justice echoing from the grave. Knight could not endure their possession. He tore the letter into fragments.

He heard a brushing among the bushes behind, and turning his head he saw Elfride following him. The fair girl looked in his face with a wistful smile of hope, too forcedly hopeful to displace the firmly established dread beneath it. His severe words of the previous night still sat heavy upon her.

'I saw you from my window, Harry,' she said timidly.

'The dew will make your feet wet,' he observed, as one deaf.

'I don't mind it.'

'There is danger in getting wet feet.'

'Yes...Harry, what is the matter?'

'Oh, nothing. Shall I resume the serious conversation I had with you last night? No, perhaps not; perhaps I had better not.'

'Oh, I cannot tell! How wretched it all is! Ah, I wish you were your own dear self again, and had kissed me when I came up! Why didn't you ask me for one? why don't you now?'

'Too free in manner by half,' he heard murmur the voice within him.

'It was that hateful conversation last night,' she went on. 'Oh, those words! Last night was a black night for me.'

'Kiss! — I hate that word! Don't talk of kissing, for God's sake! I should think you might with advantage have shown tact enough to keep back that word "kiss," considering those you have accepted.'

She became very pale, and a rigid and desolate character took possession of her face. That face was so delicate and tender in appearance now, that one could fancy the pressure of a finger upon it would cause a livid spot.

Knight walked on, and Elfride with him, silent and unopposing. He opened a gate, and they entered a path across a stubble-field.

'Perhaps I intrude upon you?' she said as he closed the gate. 'Shall I go away?'

'No. Listen to me, Elfride.' Knight's voice was low and unequal. 'I have been honest with you: will you be so with me? If any — strange — connection has existed between yourself and a predecessor of mine, tell it now. It is better that I know it now, even

though the knowledge should part us, than that I should discover it in time to come. And suspicions have been awakened in me. I think I will not say how, because I despise the means. A discovery of any mystery of your past would embitter our lives.'

Knight waited with a slow manner of calmness. His eyes were sad and imperative. They went farther along the path.

'Will you forgive me if I tell you all?' she exclaimed entreatingly.

'I can't promise; so much depends upon what you have to tell.'

Elfride could not endure the silence which followed.

'Are you not going to love me?' she burst out. 'Harry, Harry, love me, and speak as usual! Do; I beseech you, Harry!'

'Are you going to act fairly by me?' said Knight, with rising anger; 'or are you not? What have I done to you that I should be put off like this? Be caught like a bird in a springe; everything intended to be hidden from me! Why is it, Elfride? That's what I ask you.'

In their agitation they had left the path, and were wandering among the wet and obstructive stubble, without knowing or heeding it.

'What have I done?' she faltered.

'What? How can you ask what, when you know so well? You KNOW that I have designedly been kept in ignorance of something attaching to you, which, had I known of it, might have altered all my conduct; and yet you say, what?'

She drooped visibly, and made no answer.

'Not that I believe in malicious letter-writers and whisperers; not I. I don't know whether I do or don't: upon my soul, I can't tell. I know this: a religion was building itself upon you in my heart. I looked into your eyes, and thought I saw there truth and innocence as pure and perfect as ever embodied by God in the flesh of woman. Perfect truth is too much to expect, but ordinary truth I WILL HAVE or nothing at all. Just say, then; is the matter you keep back of the gravest importance, or is it not?'

'I don't understand all your meaning. If I have hidden anything from you, it has been because I loved you so, and I feared — feared — to lose you.'

'Since you are not given to confidence, I want to ask you some plain questions. Have I your permission?'

'Yes,' she said, and there came over her face a weary resignation. 'Say the harshest words you can; I will bear them!'

'There is a scandal in the air concerning you, Elfride; and I cannot even combat it without knowing definitely what it is. It may not refer to you entirely, or even at all.' Knight trifled in the very bitterness of his feeling. 'In the time of the French Revolution, Pariseau, a ballet-master, was beheaded by mistake for Parisot, a captain of the King's Guard. I wish there was another "E. Swancourt" in the neighbourhood. Look at this.'

He handed her the letter she had written and left on the table at Mrs. Jethway's. She looked over it vacantly.

‘It is not so much as it seems!’ she pleaded. ‘It seems wickedly deceptive to look at now, but it had a much more natural origin than you think. My sole wish was not to endanger our love. O Harry! that was all my idea. It was not much harm.’

‘Yes, yes; but independently of the poor miserable creature’s remarks, it seems to imply — something wrong.’

‘What remarks?’

‘Those she wrote me — now torn to pieces. Elfride, DID you run away with a man you loved? — that was the damnable statement. Has such an accusation life in it — really, truly, Elfride?’

‘Yes,’ she whispered.

Knight’s countenance sank. ‘To be married to him?’ came huskily from his lips.

‘Yes. Oh, forgive me! I had never seen you, Harry.’

‘To London?’

‘Yes; but I — — ’

‘Answer my questions; say nothing else, Elfride Did you ever deliberately try to marry him in secret?’

‘No; not deliberately.’

‘But did you do it?’

A feeble red passed over her face.

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘And after that — did you — write to him as your husband; and did he address you as his wife?’

‘Listen, listen! It was — — ’

‘Do answer me; only answer me!’

‘Then, yes, we did.’ Her lips shook; but it was with some little dignity that she continued: ‘I would gladly have told you; for I knew and know I had done wrong. But I dared not; I loved you too well. Oh, so well! You have been everything in the world to me — and you are now. Will you not forgive me?’

It is a melancholy thought, that men who at first will not allow the verdict of perfection they pronounce upon their sweethearts or wives to be disturbed by God’s own testimony to the contrary, will, once suspecting their purity, morally hang them upon evidence they would be ashamed to admit in judging a dog.

The reluctance to tell, which arose from Elfride’s simplicity in thinking herself so much more culpable than she really was, had been doing fatal work in Knight’s mind. The man of many ideas, now that his first dream of impossible things was over, vibrated too far in the contrary direction; and her every movement of feature — every tremor — every confused word — was taken as so much proof of her unworthiness.

‘Elfride, we must bid good-bye to compliment,’ said Knight: ‘we must do without politeness now. Look in my face, and as you believe in God above, tell me truly one thing more. Were you away alone with him?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you return home the same day on which you left it?’

‘No.’

The word fell like a bolt, and the very land and sky seemed to suffer. Knight turned aside. Meantime Elfride’s countenance wore a look indicating utter despair of being able to explain matters so that they would seem no more than they really were, — a despair which not only relinquishes the hope of direct explanation, but wearily gives up all collateral chances of extenuation.

The scene was engraved for years on the retina of Knight’s eye: the dead and brown stubble, the weeds among it, the distant belt of beeches shutting out the view of the house, the leaves of which were now red and sick to death.

‘You must forget me,’ he said. ‘We shall not marry, Elfride.’

How much anguish passed into her soul at those words from him was told by the look of supreme torture she wore.

‘What meaning have you, Harry? You only say so, do you?’

She looked doubtfully up at him, and tried to laugh, as if the unreality of his words must be unquestionable.

‘You are not in earnest, I know — I hope you are not? Surely I belong to you, and you are going to keep me for yours?’

‘Elfride, I have been speaking too roughly to you; I have said what I ought only to have thought. I like you; and let me give you a word of advice. Marry your man as soon as you can. However weary of each other you may feel, you belong to each other, and I am not going to step between you. Do you think I would — do you think I could for a moment? If you cannot marry him now, and another makes you his wife, do not reveal this secret to him after marriage, if you do not before. Honesty would be damnation then.’

Bewildered by his expressions, she exclaimed —

‘No, no; I will not be a wife unless I am yours; and I must be yours!’

‘If we had married — — ’

‘But you don’t MEAN — that — that — you will go away and leave me, and not be anything more to me — oh, you don’t!’

Convulsive sobs took all nerve out of her utterance. She checked them, and continued to look in his face for the ray of hope that was not to be found there.

‘I am going indoors,’ said Knight. ‘You will not follow me, Elfride; I wish you not to.’

‘Oh no; indeed, I will not.’

‘And then I am going to Castle Boterel. Good-bye.’

He spoke the farewell as if it were but for the day — lightly, as he had spoken such temporary farewells many times before — and she seemed to understand it as such. Knight had not the power to tell her plainly that he was going for ever; he hardly knew for certain that he was: whether he should rush back again upon the current of an irresistible emotion, or whether he could sufficiently conquer himself, and her in him, to establish that parting as a supreme farewell, and present himself to the world again as no woman’s.

Ten minutes later he had left the house, leaving directions that if he did not return in the evening his luggage was to be sent to his chambers in London, whence he intended to write to Mr. Swancourt as to the reasons of his sudden departure. He descended the valley, and could not forbear turning his head. He saw the stubble-field, and a slight girlish figure in the midst of it — up against the sky. Elfride, docile as ever, had hardly moved a step, for he had said, Remain. He looked and saw her again — he saw her for weeks and months. He withdrew his eyes from the scene, swept his hand across them, as if to brush away the sight, breathed a low groan, and went on.

CHAPTER XXXV

‘And wilt thou leave me thus? — say nay — say nay!’

The scene shifts to Knight’s chambers in Bede’s Inn. It was late in the evening of the day following his departure from Endelstow. A drizzling rain descended upon London, forming a humid and dreary halo over every well-lighted street. The rain had not yet been prevalent long enough to give to rapid vehicles that clear and distinct rattle which follows the thorough washing of the stones by a drenching rain, but was just sufficient to make footway and roadway slippery, adhesive, and clogging to both feet and wheels.

Knight was standing by the fire, looking into its expiring embers, previously to emerging from his door for a dreary journey home to Richmond. His hat was on, and the gas turned off. The blind of the window overlooking the alley was not drawn down; and with the light from beneath, which shone over the ceiling of the room, came, in place of the usual babble, only the reduced clatter and quick speech which were the result of necessity rather than choice.

Whilst he thus stood, waiting for the expiration of the few minutes that were wanting to the time for his catching the train, a light tapping upon the door mingled with the other sounds that reached his ears. It was so faint at first that the outer noises were almost sufficient to drown it. Finding it repeated Knight crossed the lobby, crowded with books and rubbish, and opened the door.

A woman, closely muffled up, but visibly of fragile build, was standing on the landing under the gaslight. She sprang forward, flung her arms round Knight’s neck, and uttered a low cry —

‘O Harry, Harry, you are killing me! I could not help coming. Don’t send me away — don’t! Forgive your Elfride for coming — I love you so!’

Knight’s agitation and astonishment mastered him for a few moments.

‘Elfride!’ he cried, ‘what does this mean? What have you done?’

‘Do not hurt me and punish me — Oh, do not! I couldn’t help coming; it was killing me. Last night, when you did not come back, I could not bear it — I could not! Only let me be with you, and see your face, Harry; I don’t ask for more.’

Her eyelids were hot, heavy, and thick with excessive weeping, and the delicate rose-red of her cheeks was disfigured and inflamed by the constant chafing of the handkerchief in wiping her many tears.

‘Who is with you? Have you come alone?’ he hurriedly inquired.

‘Yes. When you did not come last night, I sat up hoping you would come — and the night was all agony — and I waited on and on, and you did not come! Then when it was morning, and your letter said you were gone, I could not endure it; and I ran away from them to St. Launce’s, and came by the train. And I have been all day travelling to you, and you won’t make me go away again, will you, Harry, because I shall always love you till I die?’

‘Yet it is wrong for you to stay. O Elfride! what have you committed yourself to? It is ruin to your good name to run to me like this! Has not your first experience been sufficient to keep you from these things?’

‘My name! Harry, I shall soon die, and what good will my name be to me then? Oh, could I but be the man and you the woman, I would not leave you for such a little fault as mine! Do not think it was so vile a thing in me to run away with him. Ah, how I wish you could have run away with twenty women before you knew me, that I might show you I would think it no fault, but be glad to get you after them all, so that I had you! If you only knew me through and through, how true I am, Harry. Cannot I be yours? Say you love me just the same, and don’t let me be separated from you again, will you? I cannot bear it — all the long hours and days and nights going on, and you not there, but away because you hate me!’

‘Not hate you, Elfride,’ he said gently, and supported her with his arm. ‘But you cannot stay here now — just at present, I mean.’

‘I suppose I must not — I wish I might. I am afraid that if — you lose sight of me — something dark will happen, and we shall not meet again. Harry, if I am not good enough to be your wife, I wish I could be your servant and live with you, and not be sent away never to see you again. I don’t mind what it is except that!’

‘No, I cannot send you away: I cannot. God knows what dark future may arise out of this evening’s work; but I cannot send you away! You must sit down, and I will endeavour to collect my thoughts and see what had better be done.’

At that moment a loud knocking at the house door was heard by both, accompanied by a hurried ringing of the bell that echoed from attic to basement. The door was quickly opened, and after a few hasty words of converse in the hall, heavy footsteps ascended the stairs.

The face of Mr. Swancourt, flushed, grieved, and stern, appeared round the landing of the staircase. He came higher up, and stood beside them. Glancing over and past Knight with silent indignation, he turned to the trembling girl.

‘O Elfride! and have I found you at last? Are these your tricks, madam? When will you get rid of your idiocies, and conduct yourself like a decent woman? Is my family name and house to be disgraced by acts that would be a scandal to a washerwoman’s daughter? Come along, madam; come!’

‘She is so weary!’ said Knight, in a voice of intensest anguish. ‘Mr. Swancourt, don’t be harsh with her — let me beg of you to be tender with her, and love her!’

‘To you, sir,’ said Mr. Swancourt, turning to him as if by the sheer pressure of circumstances, ‘I have little to say. I can only remark, that the sooner I can retire from your presence the better I shall be pleased. Why you could not conduct your courtship of my daughter like an honest man, I do not know. Why she — a foolish inexperienced girl — should have been tempted to this piece of folly, I do not know. Even if she had not known better than to leave her home, you might have, I should think.’

‘It is not his fault: he did not tempt me, papa! I came.’

‘If you wished the marriage broken off, why didn’t you say so plainly? If you never intended to marry, why could you not leave her alone? Upon my soul, it grates me to the heart to be obliged to think so ill of a man I thought my friend!’

Knight, soul-sick and weary of his life, did not arouse himself to utter a word in reply. How should he defend himself when his defence was the accusation of Elfride? On that account he felt a miserable satisfaction in letting her father go on thinking and speaking wrongfully. It was a faint ray of pleasure straying into the great gloominess of his brain to think that the vicar might never know but that he, as her lover, tempted her away, which seemed to be the form Mr. Swancourt’s misapprehension had taken.

‘Now, are you coming?’ said Mr. Swancourt to her again. He took her unresisting hand, drew it within his arm, and led her down the stairs. Knight’s eyes followed her, the last moment begetting in him a frantic hope that she would turn her head. She passed on, and never looked back.

He heard the door open — close again. The wheels of a cab grazed the kerbstone, a murmured direction followed. The door was slammed together, the wheels moved, and they rolled away.

From that hour of her reappearance a dreadful conflict raged within the breast of Henry Knight. His instinct, emotion, affectiveness — or whatever it may be called — urged him to stand forward, seize upon Elfride, and be her cherisher and protector through life. Then came the devastating thought that Elfride’s childlike, unreasoning, and indiscreet act in flying to him only proved that the proprieties must be a dead letter with her; that the unreserve, which was really artlessness without ballast, meant indifference to decorum; and what so likely as that such a woman had been deceived in the past? He said to himself, in a mood of the bitterest cynicism: ‘The suspicious discreet woman who imagines dark and evil things of all her fellow-creatures is far too shrewd to be deluded by man: trusting beings like Elfride are the women who fall.’

Hours and days went by, and Knight remained inactive. Lengthening time, which made fainter the heart-awakening power of her presence, strengthened the mental ability to reason her down. Elfride loved him, he knew, and he could not leave off loving her but marry her he would not. If she could but be again his own Elfride — the woman she had seemed to be — but that woman was dead and buried, and he knew her no more! And how could he marry this Elfride, one who, if he had originally

seen her as she was, would have been barely an interesting pitiable acquaintance in his eyes — no more?

It cankered his heart to think he was confronted by the closest instance of a worse state of things than any he had assumed in the pleasant social philosophy and satire of his essays.

The moral rightness of this man's life was worthy of all praise; but in spite of some intellectual acumen, Knight had in him a modicum of that wrongheadedness which is mostly found in scrupulously honest people. With him, truth seemed too clean and pure an abstraction to be so hopelessly churned in with error as practical persons find it. Having now seen himself mistaken in supposing Elfride to be peerless, nothing on earth could make him believe she was not so very bad after all.

He lingered in town a fortnight, doing little else than vibrate between passion and opinions. One idea remained intact — that it was better Elfride and himself should not meet.

When he surveyed the volumes on his shelves — few of which had been opened since Elfride first took possession of his heart — their untouched and orderly arrangement reproached him as an apostate from the old faith of his youth and early manhood. He had deserted those never-failing friends, so they seemed to say, for an unstable delight in a ductile woman, which had ended all in bitterness. The spirit of self-denial, verging on asceticism, which had ever animated Knight in old times, announced itself as having departed with the birth of love, with it having gone the self-respect which had compensated for the lack of self-gratification. Poor little Elfride, instead of holding, as formerly, a place in his religion, began to assume the hue of a temptation. Perhaps it was human and correctly natural that Knight never once thought whether he did not owe her a little sacrifice for her uncharry devotion in saving his life.

With a consciousness of having thus, like Antony, kissed away kingdoms and provinces, he next considered how he had revealed his higher secrets and intentions to her, an unreserve he would never have allowed himself with any man living. How was it that he had not been able to refrain from telling her of adumbrations heretofore locked in the closest strongholds of his mind?

Knight's was a robust intellect, which could escape outside the atmosphere of heart, and perceive that his own love, as well as other people's, could be reduced by change of scene and circumstances. At the same time the perception was a superimposed sorrow: 'O last regret, regret can die!'

But being convinced that the death of this regret was the best thing for him, he did not long shrink from attempting it. He closed his chambers, suspended his connection with editors, and left London for the Continent. Here we will leave him to wander without purpose, beyond the nominal one of encouraging obliviousness of Elfride.

CHAPTER XXXVI

‘The pennie’s the jewel that beautifies a’.’

‘I can’t think what’s coming to these St. Launce’s people at all at all.’

‘With their “How-d’ye-do’s,” do you mean?’

‘Ay, with their “How-d’ye-do’s,” and shaking of hands, asking me in, and tender inquiries for you, John.’

These words formed part of a conversation between John Smith and his wife on a Saturday evening in the spring which followed Knight’s departure from England. Stephen had long since returned to India; and the persevering couple themselves had migrated from Lord Luxellian’s park at Endelstow to a comfortable roadside dwelling about a mile out of St. Launce’s, where John had opened a small stone and slate yard in his own name.

‘When we came here six months ago,’ continued Mrs. Smith, ‘though I had paid ready money so many years in the town, my friskier shopkeepers would only speak over the counter. Meet ‘em in the street half-an-hour after, and they’d treat me with staring ignorance of my face.’

‘Look through ye as through a glass winder?’

‘Yes, the brazen ones would. The quiet and cool ones would glance over the top of my head, past my side, over my shoulder, but never meet my eye. The gentle-modest would turn their faces south if I were coming east, flit down a passage if I were about to halve the pavement with them. There was the spruce young bookseller would play the same tricks; the butcher’s daughters; the upholsterer’s young men. Hand in glove when doing business out of sight with you; but caring nothing for a’ old woman when playing the genteel away from all signs of their trade.’

‘True enough, Maria.’

‘Well, to-day ‘tis all different. I’d no sooner got to market than Mrs. Joakes rushed up to me in the eyes of the town and said, “My dear Mrs. Smith, now you must be tired with your walk! Come in and have some lunch! I insist upon it; knowing you so many years as I have! Don’t you remember when we used to go looking for owls’ feathers together in the Castle ruins?” There’s no knowing what you may need, so I answered the woman civilly. I hadn’t got to the corner before that thriving young lawyer, Sweet, who’s quite the dandy, ran after me out of breath. “Mrs. Smith,” he says, “excuse my rudeness, but there’s a bramble on the tail of your dress, which you’ve dragged in from the country; allow me to pull it off for you.” If you’ll believe me, this was in the very front of the Town Hall. What’s the meaning of such sudden love for a’ old woman?’

‘Can’t say; unless ‘tis repentance.’

‘Repentance! was there ever such a fool as you. John? Did anybody ever repent with money in’s pocket and fifty years to live?’

‘Now, I’ve been thinking too,’ said John, passing over the query as hardly pertinent, ‘that I’ve had more loving-kindness from folks to-day than I ever have before since we moved here. Why, old Alderman Tope walked out to the middle of the street where I

was, to shake hands with me — so ‘a did. Having on my working clothes, I thought ‘twas odd. Ay, and there was young Werrington.’

‘Who’s he?’

‘Why, the man in Hill Street, who plays and sells flutes, trumpets, and fiddles, and grand pehanners. He was talking to Egloskerry, that very small bachelor-man with money in the funds. I was going by, I’m sure, without thinking or expecting a nod from men of that glib kidney when in my working clothes — — ’

‘You always will go poking into town in your working clothes. Beg you to change how I will, ‘tis no use.’

‘Well, however, I was in my working clothes. Werrington saw me. “Ah, Mr. Smith! a fine morning; excellent weather for building,” says he, out as loud and friendly as if I’d met him in some deep hollow, where he could get nobody else to speak to at all. ‘Twas odd: for Werrington is one of the very ringleaders of the fast class.’

At that moment a tap came to the door. The door was immediately opened by Mrs. Smith in person.

‘You’ll excuse us, I’m sure, Mrs. Smith, but this beautiful spring weather was too much for us. Yes, and we could stay in no longer; and I took Mrs. Trewen upon my arm directly we’d had a cup of tea, and out we came. And seeing your beautiful crocuses in such a bloom, we’ve taken the liberty to enter. We’ll step round the garden, if you don’t mind.’

‘Not at all,’ said Mrs. Smith; and they walked round the garden. She lifted her hands in amazement directly their backs were turned. ‘Goodness send us grace!’

‘Who be they?’ said her husband.

‘Actually Mr. Trewen, the bank-manager, and his wife.’

John Smith, staggered in mind, went out of doors and looked over the garden gate, to collect his ideas. He had not been there two minutes when wheels were heard, and a carriage and pair rolled along the road. A distinguished-looking lady, with the demeanour of a duchess, reclined within. When opposite Smith’s gate she turned her head, and instantly commanded the coachman to stop.

‘Ah, Mr. Smith, I am glad to see you looking so well. I could not help stopping a moment to congratulate you and Mrs. Smith upon the happiness you must enjoy. Joseph, you may drive on.’

And the carriage rolled away towards St. Launce’s.

Out rushed Mrs. Smith from behind a laurel-bush, where she had stood pondering.

‘Just going to touch my hat to her,’ said John; ‘just for all the world as I would have to poor Lady Luxellian years ago.’

‘Lord! who is she?’

‘The public-house woman — what’s her name? Mrs. — Mrs. — at the Falcon.’

‘Public-house woman. The clumsiness of the Smith family! You MIGHT say the landlady of the Falcon Hotel, since we are in for politeness. The people are ridiculous enough, but give them their due.’

The possibility is that Mrs. Smith was getting mollified, in spite of herself, by these remarkably friendly phenomena among the people of St. Launce's. And in justice to them it was quite desirable that she should do so. The interest which the unpractised ones of this town expressed so grotesquely was genuine of its kind, and equal in intrinsic worth to the more polished smiles of larger communities.

By this time Mr. and Mrs. Trewen were returning from the garden.

'I'll ask 'em flat,' whispered John to his wife. 'I'll say, "We be in a fog — you'll excuse my asking a question, Mr. and Mrs. Trewen. How is it you all be so friendly to-day?" Hey? 'Twould sound right and sensible, wouldn't it?'

'Not a word! Good mercy, when will the man have manners!'

'It must be a proud moment for you, I am sure, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, to have a son so celebrated,' said the bank-manager advancing.

'Ah, 'tis Stephen — I knew it!' said Mrs. Smith triumphantly to herself.

'We don't know particulars,' said John.

'Not know!'

'No.'

'Why, 'tis all over town. Our worthy Mayor alluded to it in a speech at the dinner last night of the Every-Man-his-own-Maker Club.'

'And what about Stephen?' urged Mrs. Smith.

'Why, your son has been feted by deputy-governors and Parsee princes and nobody-knows-who in India; is hand in glove with nabobs, and is to design a large palace, and cathedral, and hospitals, colleges, halls, and fortifications, by the general consent of the ruling powers, Christian and Pagan alike.'

'Twas sure to come to the boy,' said Mr. Smith unassumingly.

'Tis in yesterday's St. Launce's Chronicle; and our worthy Mayor in the chair introduced the subject into his speech last night in a masterly manner.'

'Twas very good of the worthy Mayor in the chair I'm sure,' said Stephen's mother. 'I hope the boy will have the sense to keep what he's got; but as for men, they are a simple sex. Some woman will hook him.'

'Well, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, the evening closes in, and we must be going; and remember this, that every Saturday when you come in to market, you are to make our house as your own. There will be always a tea-cup and saucer for you, as you know there has been for months, though you may have forgotten it. I'm a plain-speaking woman, and what I say I mean.'

When the visitors were gone, and the sun had set, and the moon's rays were just beginning to assert themselves upon the walls of the dwelling, John Smith and his wife sat dawn to the newspaper they had hastily procured from the town. And when the reading was done, they considered how best to meet the new social requirements settling upon them, which Mrs. Smith considered could be done by new furniture and house enlargement alone.

'And, John, mind one thing,' she said in conclusion. 'In writing to Stephen, never by any means mention the name of Elfride Swancourt again. We've left the place, and

know no more about her except by hearsay. He seems to be getting free of her, and glad am I for it. It was a cloudy hour for him when he first set eyes upon the girl. That family's been no good to him, first or last; so let them keep their blood to themselves if they want to. He thinks of her, I know, but not so hopelessly. So don't try to know anything about her, and we can't answer his questions. She may die out of his mind then.'

'That shall be it,' said John.

CHAPTER XXXVII

'After many days.'

Knight roamed south, under colour of studying Continental antiquities.

He paced the lofty aisles of Amiens, loitered by Ardennes Abbey, climbed into the strange towers of Laon, analyzed Noyon and Rheims. Then he went to Chartres, and examined its scaly spires and quaint carving then he idled about Coutances. He rowed beneath the base of Mont St. Michel, and caught the varied skyline of the crumbling edifices encrusting it. St. Ouen's, Rouen, knew him for days; so did Vezelay, Sens, and many a hallowed monument besides. Abandoning the inspection of early French art with the same purposeless haste as he had shown in undertaking it, he went further, and lingered about Ferrara, Padua, and Pisa. Satiated with mediaevalism, he tried the Roman Forum. Next he observed moonlight and starlight effects by the bay of Naples. He turned to Austria, became enervated and depressed on Hungarian and Bohemian plains, and was refreshed again by breezes on the declivities of the Carpathians.

Then he found himself in Greece. He visited the plain of Marathon, and strove to imagine the Persian defeat; to Mars Hill, to picture St. Paul addressing the ancient Athenians; to Thermopylae and Salamis, to run through the facts and traditions of the Second Invasion — the result of his endeavours being more or less chaotic. Knight grew as weary of these places as of all others. Then he felt the shock of an earthquake in the Ionian Islands, and went to Venice. Here he shot in gondolas up and down the winding thoroughfare of the Grand Canal, and loitered on calle and piazza at night, when the lagunes were undisturbed by a ripple, and no sound was to be heard but the stroke of the midnight clock. Afterwards he remained for weeks in the museums, galleries, and libraries of Vienna, Berlin, and Paris; and thence came home.

Time thus rolls us on to a February afternoon, divided by fifteen months from the parting of Elfride and her lover in the brown stubble field towards the sea.

Two men obviously not Londoners, and with a touch of foreignness in their look, met by accident on one of the gravel walks leading across Hyde Park. The younger, more given to looking about him than his fellow, saw and noticed the approach of his senior some time before the latter had raised his eyes from the ground, upon which they were bent in an abstracted gaze that seemed habitual with him.

'Mr. Knight — indeed it is!' exclaimed the younger man.

'Ah, Stephen Smith!' said Knight.

Simultaneous operations might now have been observed progressing in both, the result being that an expression less frank and impulsive than the first took possession of their features. It was manifest that the next words uttered were a superficial covering to constraint on both sides.

'Have you been in England long?' said Knight.

'Only two days,' said Smith.

'India ever since?'

'Nearly ever since.'

'They were making a fuss about you at St. Launce's last year. I fancy I saw something of the sort in the papers.'

'Yes; I believe something was said about me.'

'I must congratulate you on your achievements.'

'Thanks, but they are nothing very extraordinary. A natural professional progress where there was no opposition.'

There followed that want of words which will always assert itself between nominal friends who find they have ceased to be real ones, and have not yet sunk to the level of mere acquaintance. Each looked up and down the Park. Knight may possibly have borne in mind during the intervening months Stephen's manner towards him the last time they had met, and may have encouraged his former interest in Stephen's welfare to die out of him as misplaced. Stephen certainly was full of the feelings begotten by the belief that Knight had taken away the woman he loved so well.

Stephen Smith then asked a question, adopting a certain recklessness of manner and tone to hide, if possible, the fact that the subject was a much greater one to him than his friend had ever supposed.

'Are you married?'

'I am not.'

Knight spoke in an indescribable tone of bitterness that was almost moroseness.

'And I never shall be,' he added decisively. 'Are you?'

'No,' said Stephen, sadly and quietly, like a man in a sick-room. Totally ignorant whether or not Knight knew of his own previous claims upon Elfride, he yet resolved to hazard a few more words upon the topic which had an aching fascination for him even now.

'Then your engagement to Miss Swancourt came to nothing,' he said. 'You remember I met you with her once?'

Stephen's voice gave way a little here, in defiance of his firmest will to the contrary. Indian affairs had not yet lowered those emotions down to the point of control.

'It was broken off,' came quickly from Knight. 'Engagements to marry often end like that — for better or for worse.'

'Yes; so they do. And what have you been doing lately?'

'Doing? Nothing.'

'Where have you been?'

'I can hardly tell you. In the main, going about Europe; and it may perhaps interest you to know that I have been attempting the serious study of Continental art of the Middle Ages. My notes on each example I visited are at your service. They are of no use to me.'

'I shall be glad with them...Oh, travelling far and near!'

'Not far,' said Knight, with moody carelessness. 'You know, I daresay, that sheep occasionally become giddy — hydatids in the head, 'tis called, in which their brains become eaten up, and the animal exhibits the strange peculiarity of walking round and round in a circle continually. I have travelled just in the same way — round and round like a giddy ram.'

The reckless, bitter, and rambling style in which Knight talked, as if rather to vent his images than to convey any ideas to Stephen, struck the young man painfully. His former friend's days had become cankered in some way: Knight was a changed man. He himself had changed much, but not as Knight had changed.

'Yesterday I came home,' continued Knight, 'without having, to the best of my belief, imbibed half-a-dozen ideas worth retaining.'

'You out-Hamlet Hamlet in morbidness of mood,' said Stephen, with regretful frankness.

Knight made no reply.

'Do you know,' Stephen continued, 'I could almost have sworn that you would be married before this time, from what I saw?'

Knight's face grew harder. 'Could you?' he said.

Stephen was powerless to forsake the depressing, luring subject.

'Yes; and I simply wonder at it.'

'Whom did you expect me to marry?'

'Her I saw you with.'

'Thank you for that wonder.'

'Did she jilt you?'

'Smith, now one word to you,' Knight returned steadily. 'Don't you ever question me on that subject. I have a reason for making this request, mind. And if you do question me, you will not get an answer.'

'Oh, I don't for a moment wish to ask what is unpleasant to you — not I. I had a momentary feeling that I should like to explain something on my side, and hear a similar explanation on yours. But let it go, let it go, by all means.'

'What would you explain?'

'I lost the woman I was going to marry: you have not married as you intended. We might have compared notes.'

'I have never asked you a word about your case.'

'I know that.'

'And the inference is obvious.'

'Quite so.'

‘The truth is, Stephen, I have doggedly resolved never to allude to the matter — for which I have a very good reason.’

‘Doubtless. As good a reason as you had for not marrying her.’

‘You talk insidiously. I had a good one — a miserably good one!’

Smith’s anxiety urged him to venture one more question.

‘Did she not love you enough?’ He drew his breath in a slow and attenuated stream, as he waited in timorous hope for the answer.

‘Stephen, you rather strain ordinary courtesy in pressing questions of that kind after what I have said. I cannot understand you at all. I must go on now.’

‘Why, good God!’ exclaimed Stephen passionately, ‘you talk as if you hadn’t at all taken her away from anybody who had better claims to her than you!’

‘What do you mean by that?’ said Knight, with a puzzled air. ‘What have you heard?’

‘Nothing. I too must go on. Good-day.’

‘If you will go,’ said Knight, reluctantly now, ‘you must, I suppose. I am sure I cannot understand why you behave so.’

‘Nor I why you do. I have always been grateful to you, and as far as I am concerned we need never have become so estranged as we have.’

‘And have I ever been anything but well-disposed towards you, Stephen? Surely you know that I have not! The system of reserve began with you: you know that.’

‘No, no! You altogether mistake our position. You were always from the first reserved to me, though I was confidential to you. That was, I suppose, the natural issue of our differing positions in life. And when I, the pupil, became reserved like you, the master, you did not like it. However, I was going to ask you to come round and see me.’

‘Where are you staying?’

‘At the Grosvenor Hotel, Pimlico.’

‘So am I.’

‘That’s convenient, not to say odd. Well, I am detained in London for a day or two; then I am going down to see my father and mother, who live at St. Launce’s now. Will you see me this evening?’

‘I may; but I will not promise. I was wishing to be alone for an hour or two; but I shall know where to find you, at any rate. Good-bye.’

CHAPTER XXXVIII

‘Jealousy is cruel as the grave.’

Stephen pondered not a little on this meeting with his old friend and once-beloved exemplar. He was grieved, for amid all the distractions of his latter years a still small voice of fidelity to Knight had lingered on in him. Perhaps this staunchness was because Knight ever treated him as a mere disciple — even to snubbing him sometimes; and had at last, though unwittingly, inflicted upon him the greatest snub of all, that of

taking away his sweetheart. The emotional side of his constitution was built rather after a feminine than a male model; and that tremendous wound from Knight's hand may have tended to keep alive a warmth which solicitousness would have extinguished altogether.

Knight, on his part, was vexed, after they had parted, that he had not taken Stephen in hand a little after the old manner. Those words which Smith had let fall concerning somebody having a prior claim to Elfride, would, if uttered when the man was younger, have provoked such a query as, 'Come, tell me all about it, my lad,' from Knight, and Stephen would straightway have delivered himself of all he knew on the subject.

Stephen the ingenuous boy, though now obliterated externally by Stephen the contriving man, returned to Knight's memory vividly that afternoon. He was at present but a sojourner in London; and after attending to the two or three matters of business which remained to be done that day, he walked abstractedly into the gloomy corridors of the British Museum for the half-hour previous to their closing. That meeting with Smith had reunited the present with the past, closing up the chasm of his absence from England as if it had never existed, until the final circumstances of his previous time of residence in London formed but a yesterday to the circumstances now. The conflict that then had raged in him concerning Elfride Swancourt revived, strengthened by its sleep. Indeed, in those many months of absence, though quelling the intention to make her his wife, he had never forgotten that she was the type of woman adapted to his nature; and instead of trying to obliterate thoughts of her altogether, he had grown to regard them as an infirmity it was necessary to tolerate.

Knight returned to his hotel much earlier in the evening than he would have done in the ordinary course of things. He did not care to think whether this arose from a friendly wish to close the gap that had slowly been widening between himself and his earliest acquaintance, or from a hankering desire to hear the meaning of the dark oracles Stephen had hastily pronounced, betokening that he knew something more of Elfride than Knight had supposed.

He made a hasty dinner, inquired for Smith, and soon was ushered into the young man's presence, whom he found sitting in front of a comfortable fire, beside a table spread with a few scientific periodicals and art reviews.

'I have come to you, after all,' said Knight. 'My manner was odd this morning, and it seemed desirable to call; but that you had too much sense to notice, Stephen, I know. Put it down to my wanderings in France and Italy.'

'Don't say another word, but sit down. I am only too glad to see you again.'

Stephen would hardly have cared to tell Knight just then that the minute before Knight was announced he had been reading over some old letters of Elfride's. They were not many; and until to-night had been sealed up, and stowed away in a corner of his leather trunk, with a few other mementoes and relics which had accompanied him in his travels. The familiar sights and sounds of London, the meeting with his friend, had with him also revived that sense of abiding continuity with regard to Elfride and love which his absence at the other side of the world had to some extent suspended,

though never ruptured. He at first intended only to look over these letters on the outside; then he read one; then another; until the whole was thus re-used as a stimulus to sad memories. He folded them away again, placed them in his pocket, and instead of going on with an examination into the state of the artistic world, had remained musing on the strange circumstance that he had returned to find Knight not the husband of Elfride after all.

The possibility of any given gratification begets a cumulative sense of its necessity. Stephen gave the rein to his imagination, and felt more intensely than he had felt for many months that, without Elfride, his life would never be any great pleasure to himself, or honour to his Maker.

They sat by the fire, chatting on external and random subjects, neither caring to be the first to approach the matter each most longed to discuss. On the table with the periodicals lay two or three pocket-books, one of them being open. Knight seeing from the exposed page that the contents were sketches only, began turning the leaves over carelessly with his finger. When, some time later, Stephen was out of the room, Knight proceeded to pass the interval by looking at the sketches more carefully.

The first crude ideas, pertaining to dwellings of all kinds, were roughly outlined on the different pages. Antiquities had been copied; fragments of Indian columns, colossal statues, and outlandish ornament from the temples of Elephanta and Kenneri, were carelessly intruded upon by outlines of modern doors, windows, roofs, cooking-stoves, and household furniture; everything, in short, which comes within the range of a practising architect's experience, who travels with his eyes open. Among these occasionally appeared rough delineations of mediaeval subjects for carving or illumination — heads of Virgins, Saints, and Prophets.

Stephen was not professedly a free-hand draughtsman, but he drew the human figure with correctness and skill. In its numerous repetitions on the sides and edges of the leaves, Knight began to notice a peculiarity. All the feminine saints had one type of feature. There were large nimbi and small nimbi about their drooping heads, but the face was always the same. That profile — how well Knight knew that profile!

Had there been but one specimen of the familiar countenance, he might have passed over the resemblance as accidental; but a repetition meant more. Knight thought anew of Smith's hasty words earlier in the day, and looked at the sketches again and again.

On the young man's entry, Knight said with palpable agitation —

'Stephen, who are those intended for?'

Stephen looked over the book with utter unconcern, 'Saints and angels, done in my leisure moments. They were intended as designs for the stained glass of an English church.'

'But whom do you idealise by that type of woman you always adopt for the Virgin?'

'Nobody.'

And then a thought raced along Stephen's mind and he looked up at his friend.

The truth is, Stephen's introduction of Elfride's lineaments had been so unconscious that he had not at first understood his companion's drift. The hand, like the tongue,

easily acquires the trick of repetition by rote, without calling in the mind to assist at all; and this had been the case here. Young men who cannot write verses about their Loves generally take to portraying them, and in the early days of his attachment Smith had never been weary of outlining Elfride. The lay-figure of Stephen's sketches now initiated an adjustment of many things. Knight had recognized her. The opportunity of comparing notes had come unsought.

'Elfride Swancourt, to whom I was engaged,' he said quietly.

'Stephen!'

'I know what you mean by speaking like that.'

'Was it Elfride? YOU the man, Stephen?'

'Yes; and you are thinking why did I conceal the fact from you that time at Endelstow, are you not?'

'Yes, and more — more.'

'I did it for the best; blame me if you will; I did it for the best. And now say how could I be with you afterwards as I had been before?'

'I don't know at all; I can't say.'

Knight remained fixed in thought, and once he murmured —

'I had a suspicion this afternoon that there might be some such meaning in your words about my taking her away. But I dismissed it. How came you to know her?' he presently asked, in almost a peremptory tone.

'I went down about the church; years ago now.'

'When you were with Hewby, of course, of course. Well, I can't understand it.' His tones rose. 'I don't know what to say, your hoodwinking me like this for so long!'

'I don't see that I have hoodwinked you at all.'

'Yes, yes, but' — —

Knight arose from his seat, and began pacing up and down the room. His face was markedly pale, and his voice perturbed, as he said —

'You did not act as I should have acted towards you under those circumstances. I feel it deeply; and I tell you plainly, I shall never forget it!'

'What?'

'Your behaviour at that meeting in the family vault, when I told you we were going to be married. Deception, dishonesty, everywhere; all the world's of a piece!'

Stephen did not much like this misconstruction of his motives, even though it was but the hasty conclusion of a friend disturbed by emotion.

'I could do no otherwise than I did, with due regard to her,' he said stiffly.

'Indeed!' said Knight, in the bitterest tone of reproach. 'Nor could you with due regard to her have married her, I suppose! I have hoped — longed — that HE, who turns out to be YOU, would ultimately have done that.'

'I am much obliged to you for that hope. But you talk very mysteriously. I think I had about the best reason anybody could have had for not doing that.'

'Oh, what reason was it?'

'That I could not.'

‘You ought to have made an opportunity; you ought to do so now, in bare justice to her, Stephen!’ cried Knight, carried beyond himself. ‘That you know very well, and it hurts and wounds me more than you dream to find you never have tried to make any reparation to a woman of that kind — so trusting, so apt to be run away with by her feelings — poor little fool, so much the worse for her!’

‘Why, you talk like a madman! You took her away from me, did you not?’

‘Picking up what another throws down can scarcely be called “taking away.” However, we shall not agree too well upon that subject, so we had better part.’

‘But I am quite certain you misapprehend something most grievously,’ said Stephen, shaken to the bottom of his heart. ‘What have I done; tell me? I have lost Elfride, but is that such a sin?’

‘Was it her doing, or yours?’

‘Was what?’

‘That you parted.’

‘I will tell you honestly. It was hers entirely, entirely.’

‘What was her reason?’

‘I can hardly say. But I’ll tell the story without reserve.’

Stephen until to-day had unhesitatingly held that she grew tired of him and turned to Knight; but he did not like to advance the statement now, or even to think the thought. To fancy otherwise accorded better with the hope to which Knight’s estrangement had given birth: that love for his friend was not the direct cause, but a result of her suspension of love for himself.

‘Such a matter must not be allowed to breed discord between us,’ Knight returned, relapsing into a manner which concealed all his true feeling, as if confidence now was intolerable. ‘I do see that your reticence towards me in the vault may have been dictated by prudential considerations.’ He concluded artificially, ‘It was a strange thing altogether; but not of much importance, I suppose, at this distance of time; and it does not concern me now, though I don’t mind hearing your story.’

These words from Knight, uttered with such an air of renunciation and apparent indifference, prompted Smith to speak on — perhaps with a little complacency — of his old secret engagement to Elfride. He told the details of its origin, and the peremptory words and actions of her father to extinguish their love.

Knight persevered in the tone and manner of a disinterested outsider. It had become more than ever imperative to screen his emotions from Stephen’s eye; the young man would otherwise be less frank, and their meeting would be again embittered. What was the use of untoward candour?

Stephen had now arrived at the point in his ingenuous narrative where he left the vicarage because of her father’s manner. Knight’s interest increased. Their love seemed so innocent and childlike thus far.

‘It is a nice point in casuistry,’ he observed, ‘to decide whether you were culpable or not in not telling Swancourt that your friends were parishioners of his. It was only

human nature to hold your tongue under the circumstances. Well, what was the result of your dismissal by him?’

‘That we agreed to be secretly faithful. And to insure this we thought we would marry.’

Knight’s suspense and agitation rose higher when Stephen entered upon this phase of the subject.

‘Do you mind telling on?’ he said, steadying his manner of speech.

‘Oh, not at all.’

Then Stephen gave in full the particulars of the meeting with Elfride at the railway station; the necessity they were under of going to London, unless the ceremony were to be postponed. The long journey of the afternoon and evening; her timidity and revulsion of feeling; its culmination on reaching London; the crossing over to the down-platform and their immediate departure again, solely in obedience to her wish; the journey all night; their anxious watching for the dawn; their arrival at St. Launce’s at last — were detailed. And he told how a village woman named Jethway was the only person who recognized them, either going or coming; and how dreadfully this terrified Elfride. He told how he waited in the fields whilst this then reproachful sweetheart went for her pony, and how the last kiss he ever gave her was given a mile out of the town, on the way to Endelstow.

These things Stephen related with a will. He believed that in doing so he established word by word the reasonableness of his claim to Elfride.

‘Curse her! curse that woman! — that miserable letter that parted us! O God!’

Knight began pacing the room again, and uttered this at further end.

‘What did you say?’ said Stephen, turning round.

‘Say? Did I say anything? Oh, I was merely thinking about your story, and the oddness of my having a fancy for the same woman afterwards. And that now I — I have forgotten her almost; and neither of us care about her, except just as a friend, you know, eh?’

Knight still continued at the further end of the room, somewhat in shadow.

‘Exactly,’ said Stephen, inwardly exultant, for he was really deceived by Knight’s off-hand manner.

Yet he was deceived less by the completeness of Knight’s disguise than by the persuasive power which lay in the fact that Knight had never before deceived him in anything. So this supposition that his companion had ceased to love Elfride was an enormous lightening of the weight which had turned the scale against him.

‘Admitting that Elfride COULD love another man after you,’ said the elder, under the same varnish of careless criticism, ‘she was none the worse for that experience.’

‘The worse? Of course she was none the worse.’

‘Did you ever think it a wild and thoughtless thing for her to do?’

‘Indeed, I never did,’ said Stephen. ‘I persuaded her. She saw no harm in it until she decided to return, nor did I; nor was there, except to the extent of indiscretion.’

‘Directly she thought it was wrong she would go no further?’

‘That was it. I had just begun to think it wrong too.’

‘Such a childish escapade might have been misrepresented by any evil-disposed person, might it not?’

‘It might; but I never heard that it was. Nobody who really knew all the circumstances would have done otherwise than smile. If all the world had known it, Elfride would still have remained the only one who thought her action a sin. Poor child, she always persisted in thinking so, and was frightened more than enough.’

‘Stephen, do you love her now?’

‘Well, I like her; I always shall, you know,’ he said evasively, and with all the strategy love suggested. ‘But I have not seen her for so long that I can hardly be expected to love her. Do you love her still?’

‘How shall I answer without being ashamed? What fickle beings we men are, Stephen! Men may love strongest for a while, but women love longest. I used to love her — in my way, you know.’

‘Yes, I understand. Ah, and I used to love her in my way. In fact, I loved her a good deal at one time; but travel has a tendency to obliterate early fancies.’

‘It has — it has, truly.’

Perhaps the most extraordinary feature in this conversation was the circumstance that, though each interlocutor had at first his suspicions of the other’s abiding passion awakened by several little acts, neither would allow himself to see that his friend might now be speaking deceitfully as well as he.

‘Stephen.’ resumed Knight, ‘now that matters are smooth between us, I think I must leave you. You won’t mind my hurrying off to my quarters?’

‘You’ll stay to some sort of supper surely? didn’t you come to dinner!’

‘You must really excuse me this once.’

‘Then you’ll drop in to breakfast to-morrow.’

‘I shall be rather pressed for time.’

‘An early breakfast, which shall interfere with nothing?’

‘I’ll come,’ said Knight, with as much readiness as it was possible to graft upon a huge stock of reluctance. ‘Yes, early; eight o’clock say, as we are under the same roof.’

‘Any time you like. Eight it shall be.’

And Knight left him. To wear a mask, to dissemble his feelings as he had in their late miserable conversation, was such torture that he could support it no longer. It was the first time in Knight’s life that he had ever been so entirely the player of a part. And the man he had thus deceived was Stephen, who had docilely looked up to him from youth as a superior of unblemished integrity.

He went to bed, and allowed the fever of his excitement to rage uncontrolled. Stephen — it was only he who was the rival — only Stephen! There was an anti-climax of absurdity which Knight, wretched and conscience-stricken as he was, could not help recognizing. Stephen was but a boy to him. Where the great grief lay was in perceiving that the very innocence of Elfride in reading her little fault as one so grave was what had fatally misled him. Had Elfride, with any degree of coolness, asserted that she

had done no harm, the poisonous breath of the dead Mrs. Jethway would have been inoperative. Why did he not make his little docile girl tell more? If on that subject he had only exercised the imperativeness customary with him on others, all might have been revealed. It smote his heart like a switch when he remembered how gently she had borne his scourging speeches, never answering him with a single reproach, only assuring him of her unbounded love.

Knight blessed Elfride for her sweetness, and forgot her fault. He pictured with a vivid fancy those fair summer scenes with her. He again saw her as at their first meeting, timid at speaking, yet in her eagerness to be explanatory borne forward almost against her will. How she would wait for him in green places, without showing any of the ordinary womanly affectations of indifference! How proud she was to be seen walking with him, bearing legibly in her eyes the thought that he was the greatest genius in the world!

He formed a resolution; and after that could make pretence of slumber no longer. Rising and dressing himself, he sat down and waited for day.

That night Stephen was restless too. Not because of the unwontedness of a return to English scenery; not because he was about to meet his parents, and settle down for awhile to English cottage life. He was indulging in dreams, and for the nonce the warehouses of Bombay and the plains and forts of Poonah were but a shadow's shadow. His dream was based on this one atom of fact: Elfride and Knight had become separated, and their engagement was as if it had never been. Their rupture must have occurred soon after Stephen's discovery of the fact of their union; and, Stephen went on to think, what so probable as that a return of her errant affection to himself was the cause?

Stephen's opinions in this matter were those of a lover, and not the balanced judgment of an unbiassed spectator. His naturally sanguine spirit built hope upon hope, till scarcely a doubt remained in his mind that her lingering tenderness for him had in some way been perceived by Knight, and had provoked their parting.

To go and see Elfride was the suggestion of impulses it was impossible to withstand. At any rate, to run down from St. Launce's to Castle Poterel, a distance of less than twenty miles, and glide like a ghost about their old haunts, making stealthy inquiries about her, would be a fascinating way of passing the first spare hours after reaching home on the day after the morrow.

He was now a richer man than heretofore, standing on his own bottom; and the definite position in which he had rooted himself nullified old local distinctions. He had become illustrious, even sanguine clarus, judging from the tone of the worthy Mayor of St. Launce's.

CHAPTER XXXIX

'Each to the loved one's side.'

The friends and rivals breakfasted together the next morning. Not a word was said on either side upon the matter discussed the previous evening so glibly and so hollowly. Stephen was absorbed the greater part of the time in wishing he were not forced to stay in town yet another day.

‘I don’t intend to leave for St. Launce’s till to-morrow, as you know,’ he said to Knight at the end of the meal. ‘What are you going to do with yourself to-day?’

‘I have an engagement just before ten,’ said Knight deliberately; ‘and after that time I must call upon two or three people.’

‘I’ll look for you this evening,’ said Stephen.

‘Yes, do. You may as well come and dine with me; that is, if we can meet. I may not sleep in London to-night; in fact, I am absolutely unsettled as to my movements yet. However, the first thing I am going to do is to get my baggage shifted from this place to Bede’s Inn. Good-bye for the present. I’ll write, you know, if I can’t meet you.’

It now wanted a quarter to nine o’clock. When Knight was gone, Stephen felt yet more impatient of the circumstance that another day would have to drag itself away wearily before he could set out for that spot of earth whereon a soft thought of him might perhaps be nourished still. On a sudden he admitted to his mind the possibility that the engagement he was waiting in town to keep might be postponed without much harm.

It was no sooner perceived than attempted. Looking at his watch, he found it wanted forty minutes to the departure of the ten o’clock train from Paddington, which left him a surplus quarter of an hour before it would be necessary to start for the station.

Scribbling a hasty note or two — one putting off the business meeting, another to Knight apologizing for not being able to see him in the evening — paying his bill, and leaving his heavier luggage to follow him by goods-train, he jumped into a cab and rattled off to the Great Western Station.

Shortly afterwards he took his seat in the railway carriage.

The guard paused on his whistle, to let into the next compartment to Smith’s a man of whom Stephen had caught but a hasty glimpse as he ran across the platform at the last moment.

Smith sank back into the carriage, stilled by perplexity. The man was like Knight — astonishingly like him. Was it possible it could be he? To have got there he must have driven like the wind to Bede’s Inn, and hardly have alighted before starting again. No, it could not be he; that was not his way of doing things.

During the early part of the journey Stephen Smith’s thoughts busied themselves till his brain seemed swollen. One subject was concerning his own approaching actions. He was a day earlier than his letter to his parents had stated, and his arrangement with them had been that they should meet him at Plymouth; a plan which pleased the worthy couple beyond expression. Once before the same engagement had been made, which he had then quashed by ante-dating his arrival. This time he would go right on to Castle Boterel; ramble in that well-known neighbourhood during the evening and next morning, making inquiries; and return to Plymouth to meet them as arranged —

a contrivance which would leave their cherished project undisturbed, relieving his own impatience also.

At Chippenham there was a little waiting, and some loosening and attaching of carriages.

Stephen looked out. At the same moment another man's head emerged from the adjoining window. Each looked in the other's face.

Knight and Stephen confronted one another.

'You here!' said the younger man.

'Yes. It seems that you are too,' said Knight, strangely.

'Yes.'

The selfishness of love and the cruelty of jealousy were fairly exemplified at this moment. Each of the two men looked at his friend as he had never looked at him before. Each was TROUBLED at the other's presence.

'I thought you said you were not coming till to-morrow,' remarked Knight.

'I did. It was an afterthought to come to-day. This journey was your engagement, then?'

'No, it was not. This is an afterthought of mine too. I left a note to explain it, and account for my not being able to meet you this evening as we arranged.'

'So did I for you.'

'You don't look well: you did not this morning.'

'I have a headache. You are paler to-day than you were.'

'I, too, have been suffering from headache. We have to wait here a few minutes, I think.'

They walked up and down the platform, each one more and more embarrassingly concerned with the awkwardness of his friend's presence. They reached the end of the footway, and paused in sheer absent-mindedness. Stephen's vacant eyes rested upon the operations of some porters, who were shifting a dark and curious-looking van from the rear of the train, to shunt another which was between it and the fore part of the train. This operation having been concluded, the two friends returned to the side of their carriage.

'Will you come in here?' said Knight, not very warmly.

'I have my rug and portmanteau and umbrella with me: it is rather bothering to move now,' said Stephen reluctantly. 'Why not you come here?'

'I have my traps too. It is hardly worth while to shift them, for I shall see you again, you know.'

'Oh, yes.'

And each got into his own place. Just at starting, a man on the platform held up his hands and stopped the train.

Stephen looked out to see what was the matter.

One of the officials was exclaiming to another, 'That carriage should have been attached again. Can't you see it is for the main line? Quick! What fools there are in the world!'

‘What a confounded nuisance these stoppages are!’ exclaimed Knight impatiently, looking out from his compartment. ‘What is it?’

‘That singular carriage we saw has been unfastened from our train by mistake, it seems,’ said Stephen.

He was watching the process of attaching it. The van or carriage, which he now recognized as having seen at Paddington before they started, was rich and solemn rather than gloomy in aspect. It seemed to be quite new, and of modern design, and its impressive personality attracted the notice of others beside himself. He beheld it gradually wheeled forward by two men on each side: slower and more sadly it seemed to approach: then a slight concussion, and they were connected with it, and off again.

Stephen sat all the afternoon pondering upon the reason of Knight’s unexpected reappearance. Was he going as far as Castle Boterel? If so, he could only have one object in view — a visit to Elfride. And what an idea it seemed!

At Plymouth Smith partook of a little refreshment, and then went round to the side from which the train started for Camelton, the new station near Castle Boterel and Endelstow.

Knight was already there.

Stephen walked up and stood beside him without speaking. Two men at this moment crept out from among the wheels of the waiting train.

‘The carriage is light enough,’ said one in a grim tone. ‘Light as vanity; full of nothing.’

‘Nothing in size, but a good deal in signification,’ said the other, a man of brighter mind and manners.

Smith then perceived that to their train was attached that same carriage of grand and dark aspect which had haunted them all the way from London.

‘You are going on, I suppose?’ said Knight, turning to Stephen, after idly looking at the same object.

‘Yes.’

‘We may as well travel together for the remaining distance, may we not?’

‘Certainly we will;’ and they both entered the same door.

Evening drew on apace. It chanced to be the eve of St. Valentine’s — that bishop of blessed memory to youthful lovers — and the sun shone low under the rim of a thick hard cloud, decorating the eminences of the landscape with crowns of orange fire. As the train changed its direction on a curve, the same rays stretched in through the window, and coaxed open Knight’s half-closed eyes.

‘You will get out at St. Launce’s, I suppose?’ he murmured.

‘No,’ said Stephen, ‘I am not expected till to-morrow.’ Knight was silent.

‘And you — are you going to Endelstow?’ said the younger man pointedly.

‘Since you ask, I can do no less than say I am, Stephen,’ continued Knight slowly, and with more resolution of manner than he had shown all the day. ‘I am going to Endelstow to see if Elfride Swancourt is still free; and if so, to ask her to be my wife.’

‘So am I,’ said Stephen Smith.

‘I think you’ll lose your labour,’ Knight returned with decision.

‘Naturally you do.’ There was a strong accent of bitterness in Stephen’s voice. ‘You might have said HOPE instead of THINK,’ he added.

‘I might have done no such thing. I gave you my opinion. Elfride Swancourt may have loved you once, no doubt, but it was when she was so young that she hardly knew her own mind.’

‘Thank you,’ said Stephen laconically. ‘She knew her mind as well as I did. We are the same age. If you hadn’t interfered — — ’

‘Don’t say that — don’t say it, Stephen! How can you make out that I interfered? Be just, please!’

‘Well,’ said his friend, ‘she was mine before she was yours — you know that! And it seemed a hard thing to find you had got her, and that if it had not been for you, all might have turned out well for me.’ Stephen spoke with a swelling heart, and looked out of the window to hide the emotion that would make itself visible upon his face.

‘It is absurd,’ said Knight in a kinder tone, ‘for you to look at the matter in that light. What I tell you is for your good. You naturally do not like to realise the truth — that her liking for you was only a girl’s first fancy, which has no root ever.’

‘It is not true!’ said Stephen passionately. ‘It was you put me out. And now you’ll be pushing in again between us, and depriving me of my chance again! My right, that’s what it is! How ungenerous of you to come anew and try to take her away from me! When you had won her, I did not interfere; and you might, I think, Mr. Knight, do by me as I did by you!’

‘Don’t “Mr.” me; you are as well in the world as I am now.’

‘First love is deepest; and that was mine.’

‘Who told you that?’ said Knight superciliously.

‘I had her first love. And it was through me that you and she parted. I can guess that well enough.’

‘It was. And if I were to explain to you in what way that operated in parting us, I should convince you that you do quite wrong in intruding upon her — that, as I said at first, your labour will be lost. I don’t choose to explain, because the particulars are painful. But if you won’t listen to me, go on, for Heaven’s sake. I don’t care what you do, my boy.’

‘You have no right to domineer over me as you do. Just because, when I was a lad, I was accustomed to look up to you as a master, and you helped me a little, for which I was grateful to you and have loved you, you assume too much now, and step in before me. It is cruel — it is unjust — of you to injure me so!’

Knight showed himself keenly hurt at this. ‘Stephen, those words are untrue and unworthy of any man, and they are unworthy of you. You know you wrong me. If you have ever profited by any instruction of mine, I am only too glad to know it. You know it was given ungrudgingly, and that I have never once looked upon it as making you in any way a debtor to me.’

Stephen's naturally gentle nature was touched, and it was in a troubled voice that he said, 'Yes, yes. I am unjust in that — I own it.'

'This is St. Launce's Station, I think. Are you going to get out?'

Knight's manner of returning to the matter in hand drew Stephen again into himself. 'No; I told you I was going to Endelstow,' he resolutely replied.

Knight's features became impassive, and he said no more. The train continued rattling on, and Stephen leant back in his corner and closed his eyes. The yellows of evening had turned to browns, the dusky shades thickened, and a flying cloud of dust occasionally stroked the window — borne upon a chilling breeze which blew from the north-east. The previously gilded but now dreary hills began to lose their daylight aspects of rotundity, and to become black discs vandyked against the sky, all nature wearing the cloak that six o'clock casts over the landscape at this time of the year.

Stephen started up in bewilderment after a long stillness, and it was some time before he recollected himself.

'Well, how real, how real!' he exclaimed, brushing his hand across his eyes.

'What is?' said Knight.

'That dream. I fell asleep for a few minutes, and have had a dream — the most vivid I ever remember.'

He wearily looked out into the gloom. They were now drawing near to Camelton. The lighting of the lamps was perceptible through the veil of evening — each flame starting into existence at intervals, and blinking weakly against the gusts of wind.

'What did you dream?' said Knight moodily.

'Oh, nothing to be told. 'Twas a sort of incubus. There is never anything in dreams.'

'I hardly supposed there was.'

'I know that. However, what I so vividly dreamt was this, since you would like to hear. It was the brightest of bright mornings at East Endelstow Church, and you and I stood by the font. Far away in the chancel Lord Luxellian was standing alone, cold and impassive, and utterly unlike his usual self: but I knew it was he. Inside the altar rail stood a strange clergyman with his book open. He looked up and said to Lord Luxellian, "Where's the bride?" Lord Luxellian said, "There's no bride." At that moment somebody came in at the door, and I knew her to be Lady Luxellian who died. He turned and said to her, "I thought you were in the vault below us; but that could have only been a dream of mine. Come on." Then she came on. And in brushing between us she chilled me so with cold that I exclaimed, "The life is gone out of me!" and, in the way of dreams, I awoke. But here we are at Camelton.'

They were slowly entering the station.

'What are you going to do?' said Knight. 'Do you really intend to call on the Swancourts?'

'By no means. I am going to make inquiries first. I shall stay at the Luxellian Arms to-night. You will go right on to Endelstow, I suppose, at once?'

'I can hardly do that at this time of the day. Perhaps you are not aware that the family — her father, at any rate — is at variance with me as much as with you.'

‘I didn’t know it.’

‘And that I cannot rush into the house as an old friend any more than you can. Certainly I have the privileges of a distant relationship, whatever they may be.’

Knight let down the window, and looked ahead. ‘There are a great many people at the station,’ he said. ‘They seem all to be on the look-out for us.’

When the train stopped, the half-estranged friends could perceive by the lamplight that the assemblage of idlers enclosed as a kernel a group of men in black cloaks. A side gate in the platform railing was open, and outside this stood a dark vehicle, which they could not at first characterize. Then Knight saw on its upper part forms against the sky like cedars by night, and knew the vehicle to be a hearse. Few people were at the carriage doors to meet the passengers — the majority had congregated at this upper end. Knight and Stephen alighted, and turned for a moment in the same direction.

The sombre van, which had accompanied them all day from London, now began to reveal that their destination was also its own. It had been drawn up exactly opposite the open gate. The bystanders all fell back, forming a clear lane from the gateway to the van, and the men in cloaks entered the latter conveyance.

‘They are labourers, I fancy,’ said Stephen. ‘Ah, it is strange; but I recognize three of them as Endelstow men. Rather remarkable this.’

Presently they began to come out, two and two; and under the rays of the lamp they were seen to bear between them a light-coloured coffin of satin-wood, brightly polished, and without a nail. The eight men took the burden upon their shoulders, and slowly crossed with it over to the gate.

Knight and Stephen went outside, and came close to the procession as it moved off. A carriage belonging to the cortege turned round close to a lamp. The rays shone in upon the face of the vicar of Endelstow, Mr. Swancourt — looking many years older than when they had last seen him. Knight and Stephen involuntarily drew back.

Knight spoke to a bystander. ‘What has Mr. Swancourt to do with that funeral?’

‘He is the lady’s father,’ said the bystander.

‘What lady’s father?’ said Knight, in a voice so hollow that the man stared at him.

‘The father of the lady in the coffin. She died in London, you know, and has been brought here by this train. She is to be taken home to-night, and buried to-morrow.’

Knight stood staring blindly at where the hearse had been; as if he saw it, or some one, there. Then he turned, and beheld the lithe form of Stephen bowed down like that of an old man. He took his young friend’s arm, and led him away from the light.

CHAPTER XL

‘Welcome, proud lady.’

Half an hour has passed. Two miserable men are wandering in the darkness up the miles of road from Camelton to Endelstow.

‘Has she broken her heart?’ said Henry Knight. ‘Can it be that I have killed her? I was bitter with her, Stephen, and she has died! And may God have NO mercy upon me!’

‘How can you have killed her more than I?’

‘Why, I went away from her — stole away almost — and didn’t tell her I should not come again; and at that last meeting I did not kiss her once, but let her miserably go. I have been a fool — a fool! I wish the most abject confession of it before crowds of my countrymen could in any way make amends to my darling for the intense cruelty I have shown her!’

‘YOUR darling!’ said Stephen, with a sort of laugh. ‘Any man can say that, I suppose; any man can. I know this, she was MY darling before she was yours; and after too. If anybody has a right to call her his own, it is I.’

‘You talk like a man in the dark; which is what you are. Did she ever do anything for you? Risk her name, for instance, for you?’

Yes, she did,’ said Stephen emphatically.

‘Not entirely. Did she ever live for you — prove she could not live without you — laugh and weep for you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Never! Did she ever risk her life for you — no! My darling did for me.’

‘Then it was in kindness only. When did she risk her life for you?’

‘To save mine on the cliff yonder. The poor child was with me looking at the approach of the Puffin steamboat, and I slipped down. We both had a narrow escape. I wish we had died there!’

‘Ah, but wait,’ Stephen pleaded with wet eyes. ‘She went on that cliff to see me arrive home: she had promised it. She told me she would months before. And would she have gone there if she had not cared for me at all?’

‘You have an idea that Elfride died for you, no doubt,’ said Knight, with a mournful sarcasm too nerveless to support itself.

‘Never mind. If we find that — that she died yours, I’ll say no more ever.’

‘And if we find she died yours, I’ll say no more.’

‘Very well — so it shall be.’

The dark clouds into which the sun had sunk had begun to drop rain in an increasing volume.

‘Can we wait somewhere here till this shower is over?’ said Stephen desultorily.

‘As you will. But it is not worth while. We’ll hear the particulars, and return. Don’t let people know who we are. I am not much now.’

They had reached a point at which the road branched into two — just outside the west village, one fork of the diverging routes passing into the latter place, the other stretching on to East Endelstow. Having come some of the distance by the footpath, they now found that the hearse was only a little in advance of them.

‘I fancy it has turned off to East Endelstow. Can you see?’

‘I cannot. You must be mistaken.’

Knight and Stephen entered the village. A bar of fiery light lay across the road, proceeding from the half-open door of a smithy, in which bellows were heard blowing and a hammer ringing. The rain had increased, and they mechanically turned for shelter towards the warm and cosy scene.

Close at their heels came another man, without over-coat or umbrella, and with a parcel under his arm.

‘A wet evening,’ he said to the two friends, and passed by them. They stood in the outer penthouse, but the man went in to the fire.

The smith ceased his blowing, and began talking to the man who had entered.

‘I have walked all the way from Camelton,’ said the latter. ‘Was obliged to come to-night, you know.’

He held the parcel, which was a flat one, towards the firelight, to learn if the rain had penetrated it. Resting it edgewise on the forge, he supported it perpendicularly with one hand, wiping his face with the handkerchief he held in the other.

‘I suppose you know what I’ve got here?’ he observed to the smith.

‘No, I don’t,’ said the smith, pausing again on his bellows.

‘As the rain’s not over, I’ll show you,’ said the bearer.

He laid the thin and broad package, which had acute angles in different directions, flat upon the anvil, and the smith blew up the fire to give him more light. First, after untying the package, a sheet of brown paper was removed: this was laid flat. Then he unfolded a piece of baize: this also he spread flat on the paper. The third covering was a wrapper of tissue paper, which was spread out in its turn. The enclosure was revealed, and he held it up for the smith’s inspection.

‘Oh — I see!’ said the smith, kindling with a chastened interest, and drawing close. ‘Poor young lady — ah, terrible melancholy thing — so soon too!’

Knight and Stephen turned their heads and looked.

‘And what’s that?’ continued the smith.

‘That’s the coronet — beautifully finished, isn’t it? Ah, that cost some money!’

‘‘Tis as fine a bit of metal work as ever I see — that ‘tis.’

‘It came from the same people as the coffin, you know, but was not ready soon enough to be sent round to the house in London yesterday. I’ve got to fix it on this very night.’

The carefully-packed articles were a coffin-plate and coronet.

Knight and Stephen came forward. The undertaker’s man, on seeing them look for the inscription, civilly turned it round towards them, and each read, almost at one moment, by the ruddy light of the coals:

E L F R I D E,

Wife of Spenser Hugo Luxellian,

Fifteenth Baron Luxellian:

Died February 10, 18 — .

They read it, and read it, and read it again — Stephen and Knight — as if animated by one soul. Then Stephen put his hand upon Knight's arm, and they retired from the yellow glow, further, further, till the chill darkness enclosed them round, and the quiet sky asserted its presence overhead as a dim grey sheet of blank monotony.

'Where shall we go?' said Stephen.

'I don't know.'

A long silence ensued...'Elfride married!' said Stephen then in a thin whisper, as if he feared to let the assertion loose on the world.

'False,' whispered Knight.

'And dead. Denied us both. I hate "false" — I hate it!'

Knight made no answer.

Nothing was heard by them now save the slow measurement of time by their beating pulses, the soft touch of the dribbling rain upon their clothes, and the low purr of the blacksmith's bellows hard by.

'Shall we follow Elfie any further?' Stephen said.

'No: let us leave her alone. She is beyond our love, and let her be beyond our reproach. Since we don't know half the reasons that made her do as she did, Stephen, how can we say, even now, that she was not pure and true in heart?' Knight's voice had now become mild and gentle as a child's. He went on: 'Can we call her ambitious? No. Circumstance has, as usual, overpowered her purposes — fragile and delicate as she — liable to be overthrown in a moment by the coarse elements of accident. I know that's it, — don't you?'

'It may be — it must be. Let us go on.'

They began to bend their steps towards Castle Boterel, whither they had sent their bags from Camelton. They wandered on in silence for many minutes. Stephen then paused, and lightly put his hand within Knight's arm.

'I wonder how she came to die,' he said in a broken whisper. 'Shall we return and learn a little more?'

They turned back again, and entering Endelstow a second time, came to a door which was standing open. It was that of an inn called the Welcome Home, and the house appeared to have been recently repaired and entirely modernized. The name too was not that of the same landlord as formerly, but Martin Cannister's.

Knight and Smith entered. The inn was quite silent, and they followed the passage till they reached the kitchen, where a huge fire was burning, which roared up the chimney, and sent over the floor, ceiling, and newly-whitened walls a glare so intense as to make the candle quite a secondary light. A woman in a white apron and black gown was standing there alone behind a cleanly-scrubbed deal table. Stephen first, and Knight afterwards, recognized her as Unity, who had been parlour-maid at the vicarage and young lady's-maid at the Craggs.

'Unity,' said Stephen softly, 'don't you know me?'

She looked inquiringly a moment, and her face cleared up.

‘Mr. Smith — ay, that it is!’ she said. ‘And that’s Mr. Knight. I beg you to sit down. Perhaps you know that since I saw you last I have married Martin Cannister.’

‘How long have you been married?’

‘About five months. We were married the same day that my dear Miss Elfie became Lady Luxellian.’ Tears appeared in Unity’s eyes, and filled them, and fell down her cheek, in spite of efforts to the contrary.

The pain of the two men in resolutely controlling themselves when thus exampled to admit relief of the same kind was distressing. They both turned their backs and walked a few steps away.

Then Unity said, ‘Will you go into the parlour, gentlemen?’

‘Let us stay here with her,’ Knight whispered, and turning said, ‘No; we will sit here. We want to rest and dry ourselves here for a time, if you please.’

That evening the sorrowing friends sat with their hostess beside the large fire, Knight in the recess formed by the chimney breast, where he was in shade. And by showing a little confidence they won hers, and she told them what they had stayed to hear — the latter history of poor Elfride.

‘One day — after you, Mr. Knight, left us for the last time — she was missed from the Crag, and her father went after her, and brought her home ill. Where she went to, I never knew — but she was very unwell for weeks afterwards. And she said to me that she didn’t care what became of her, and she wished she could die. When she was better, I said she would live to be married yet, and she said then, “Yes; I’ll do anything for the benefit of my family, so as to turn my useless life to some practical account.” Well, it began like this about Lord Luxellian courting her. The first Lady Luxellian had died, and he was in great trouble because the little girls were left motherless. After a while they used to come and see her in their little black frocks, for they liked her as well or better than their own mother — -that’s true. They used to call her “little mamma.” These children made her a shade livelier, but she was not the girl she had been — I could see that — and she grew thinner a good deal. Well, my lord got to ask the Swancourts oftener and oftener to dinner — nobody else of his acquaintance — and at last the vicar’s family were backwards and forwards at all hours of the day. Well, people say that the little girls asked their father to let Miss Elfride come and live with them, and that he said perhaps he would if they were good children. However, the time went on, and one day I said, “Miss Elfride, you don’t look so well as you used to; and though nobody else seems to notice it I do.” She laughed a little, and said, “I shall live to be married yet, as you told me.”

“Shall you, miss? I am glad to hear that,” I said.

“Whom do you think I am going to be married to?” she said again.

“Mr. Knight, I suppose,” said I.

“Oh!” she cried, and turned off so white, and afore I could get to her she had sunk down like a heap of clothes, and fainted away. Well, then, she came to herself after a time, and said, “Unity, now we’ll go on with our conversation.”

“Better not to-day, miss,” I said.

“Yes, we will,” she said. “Whom do you think I am going to be married to?”

“I don’t know,” I said this time.

“Guess,” she said.

“‘Tisn’t my lord, is it?” says I.

“Yes, ‘tis,” says she, in a sick wild way.

“But he don’t come courting much,” I said.

“Ah! you don’t know,” she said, and told me ‘twas going to be in October. After that she freshened up a bit — whether ‘twas with the thought of getting away from home or not, I don’t know. For, perhaps, I may as well speak plainly, and tell you that her home was no home to her now. Her father was bitter to her and harsh upon her; and though Mrs. Swancourt was well enough in her way, ‘twas a sort of cold politeness that was not worth much, and the little thing had a worrying time of it altogether. About a month before the wedding, she and my lord and the two children used to ride about together upon horseback, and a very pretty sight they were; and if you’ll believe me, I never saw him once with her unless the children were with her too — which made the courting so strange-looking. Ay, and my lord is so handsome, you know, so that at last I think she rather liked him; and I have seen her smile and blush a bit at things he said. He wanted her the more because the children did, for everybody could see that she would be a most tender mother to them, and friend and playmate too. And my lord is not only handsome, but a splendid courter, and up to all the ways o’t. So he made her the beautifullest presents; ah, one I can mind — a lovely bracelet, with diamonds and emeralds. Oh, how red her face came when she saw it! The old roses came back to her cheeks for a minute or two then. I helped dress her the day we both were married — it was the last service I did her, poor child! When she was ready, I ran upstairs and slipped on my own wedding gown, and away they went, and away went Martin and I; and no sooner had my lord and my lady been married than the parson married us. It was a very quiet pair of weddings — hardly anybody knew it. Well, hope will hold its own in a young heart, if so be it can; and my lady freshened up a bit, for my lord was SO handsome and kind.’

‘How came she to die — and away from home?’ murmured Knight.

‘Don’t you see, sir, she fell off again afore they’d been married long, and my lord took her abroad for change of scene. They were coming home, and had got as far as London, when she was taken very ill and couldn’t be moved, and there she died.’

‘Was he very fond of her?’

‘What, my lord? Oh, he was!’

‘VERY fond of her?’

‘VERY, beyond everything. Not suddenly, but by slow degrees. ‘Twas her nature to win people more when they knew her well. He’d have died for her, I believe. Poor my lord, he’s heart-broken now!’

‘The funeral is to-morrow?’

‘Yes; my husband is now at the vault with the masons, opening the steps and cleaning down the walls.’

The next day two men walked up the familiar valley from Castle Boterel to East Endelstow Church. And when the funeral was over, and every one had left the lawn-like churchyard, the pair went softly down the steps of the Luxellian vault, and under the low-groined arches they had beheld once before, lit up then as now. In the new niche of the crypt lay a rather new coffin, which had lost some of its lustre, and a newer coffin still, bright and untarnished in the slightest degree.

Beside the latter was the dark form of a man, kneeling on the damp floor, his body flung across the coffin, his hands clasped, and his whole frame seemingly given up in utter abandonment to grief. He was still young — younger, perhaps, than Knight — and even now showed how graceful was his figure and symmetrical his build. He murmured a prayer half aloud, and was quite unconscious that two others were standing within a few yards of him.

Knight and Stephen had advanced to where they once stood beside Elfride on the day all three had met there, before she had herself gone down into silence like her ancestors, and shut her bright blue eyes for ever. Not until then did they see the kneeling figure in the dim light. Knight instantly recognized the mourner as Lord Luxellian, the bereaved husband of Elfride.

They felt themselves to be intruders. Knight pressed Stephen back, and they silently withdrew as they had entered.

‘Come away,’ he said, in a broken voice. ‘We have no right to be there. Another stands before us — nearer to her than we!’

And side by side they both retraced their steps down the grey still valley to Castle Boterel.

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