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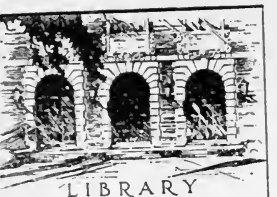

A PAIR OF BLUE EYES.

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A PAIR OF BLUE EYES.

A Novel.

By THOMAS HARDY,

AUTHOR OF

'UNDER THE GREENWOOD TREE,' 'DESPERATE REMEDIES,' ETC.

'A violet in the youth of primy nature,
Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting,
The perfume and suppliance of a minute;
No more.'

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON:

TINSLEY BROTHERS, 8 CATHERINE ST. STRAND.

1873.

CONTENTS OF VOL. III.

A PAIR OF BLUE EYES.

CHAPTER I.

'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 him 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 fogy 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 license 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 after 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 pass on without seeing her. But Mrs. Jethway, silently apostrophising 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.'

'O, 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; O, 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, look here, Miss Swancourt,' she continued, drawing closer; 'you have put it in my power to do unto you as you did to me. 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.'

'O, it a wicked cruel lie! Do not say it; O, 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 my time will come.'

'I defy you!' cried Elfride tempestuously. 'Do and say all you can to ruin me; try; put you 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.

'O 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 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.'

'"Munditiæ, 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 jewelry 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 turn-

ing 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 confidingly, 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 un-

used 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 manœuvre 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 recognised 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 keenness 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!'

'O 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. O, 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 coax-

ingly. '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 earrings doing like this.'

No sooner did she recognise 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.

'O, sitting down out of doors,' she replied hastily.

CHAPTER II.

'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 Weymouth, Jersey, and St. Malo. He then

passed through Normandy, and returned to London also, his arrival there having been two days after 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 apartment a happier man than was Knight when shown to where Elfride and her stepmother 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 ac-

complished maidens use. Her lover was with her again, and it was enough: she made her heart over to him entirely.

Dinner was soon dispatched. 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 fish-market of a ninth-rate country town, but that wouldn't matter?'

'O 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 the metropolis 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 wending their way round by the Mint, and between the preternaturally high walls of Nightin-

gale-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 wagons, 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 re-

spectable 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 cabmen?'

'O 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 high-way 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 hind 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 mêlée. 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?'

'O 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 such another, and the way on board was down a narrow lane of water between the two, about a yard and 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; or 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 sighed a sigh 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 sus-

pended 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.'

'O 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 phenomenal 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 own 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 ditto, 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 forecastle 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.

'O no,' he would answer unconcernedly. 'Why should they envy us, and what can they say?'

'Not any harm, of course,' Elfride replies; '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. 'O, 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 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 stepdaughter 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 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 the encounter was accidental. She remem-

bered 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 was sitting at the stern—her eyes 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 masthead, 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 still sat 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 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. Snew-

son 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 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 cognisant of a whispering in her ear.

'You are well on with him, I can see. Well, provoke me now, but my time will come, you will find.' That was the utterance, or words to that effect.

Elfride became broad awake, and terrified. She knew the words 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, farther on Snewson breathing more heavily.

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? Impossible.

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. The '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 compass, 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 boat 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?'

'O 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.

'O, 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 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 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 didn't mind my asking you?' she continued.

'O 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 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 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 unused 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 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?'

'O, 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, 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 sweetheart—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 in the wind, when it 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—O!'

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. 'O, 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 Exeter.'

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 breeze. 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."'

'O, 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 mediæval 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 deluging 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 sign of her form. Afterwards, in the bustle of landing, she looked again with the same re-

sult, 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 III.

'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 held an idea in opposition to any one of his, or insisted on any point, 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 *espièglerie* 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, and sometimes looking out at the rain from the sky, and a secondary rain of larger drops from trees and shrubs, which drops had 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 jewelry.'

'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.'

Now it so happened that the myrtle Knight unluckily 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 flower, 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. '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?'

'O, 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 friend more than him, and giving the flower into his charge would have made no difference. 'Except, indeed, it was the gift of a lover,' he murmured.

'I wonder if Elfride ever has 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 had a sweetheart 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.

'O, 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 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 question 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' (writhing slightly).

'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 might do her worst. And should she do it, all would 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 Crags 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. In-

distinct 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 female, 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* 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.'

'O, 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 one 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 sweetheart's part; and the fascinating finish of her deportment in this second campaign did probably arise from her unreserved practice with Stephen. Knight, with all the rapidity of jealous sensitiveness, pounced upon some words she had inadvertently let fall, 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 pains, had tended to develop the affective side of his constitution still farther in proportion to his active faculties. It was his belief in the absolute newness of male 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 to be first in the Pool of Bethesda.

Heaven save Elfride, notwithstanding her inconstancy! It was surely one of the cruelest contrivances of destiny that Knight should have been thus constituted: that her second lover should not have been one of the great mass of bustling males, less given to introspection, whose good nature might have compensated for any lack of appreciativeness. 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 pitiable. A miserable incongruity is 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 idolised him, and was proud to be his bond-servant.

CHAPTER IV.

'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 natural features of the globe

and intellectual ones of men, 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, 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 farther 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.

Had Elfride been a little more fickle than she really was, it would have been better for her by far. Morbidly-conscien-

tious sentiments of this water would have been powerless to trouble the mind of a perfect jilt, who would have carried this engagement with Knight to a triumphant issue in the face of twice as many complications. Elfride had still too lively a sense of the past to enjoy the idea of imitating to the letter peculiar actions she had lately gone through with another lover and other hopes.

'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.

Now 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 was therefore 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 at length, and looking behind him likewise.

She had relinquished the endeavour, but it was 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 dragging 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 bygones.

'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 blandishment and caressing 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' (very weakly).

'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 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.'

'Elfride, 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!'

'O, 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 the slow recklessness of despair.

'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. How much he cared few who have failed to realise the man's nature will be able to imagine.

'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 a 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.

'O, 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 V.

'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'œil* which had never been possible since the mediæval 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, wherein saints and angels vied with each other in gorgeous 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 Felix 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 under-current 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 breathed slowly. 'Yes,' she said.

The correctness of his random shot startled Knight; though, considering that 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 is 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 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? O, 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.

'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?'

'O—O—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—O, 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 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

farther 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, 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 unused 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

attrac—tion 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!'

'O, 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.

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 life-long 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 mere smashing of any bright illusion, however unjustified its existence, depreciates

ipso facto the unexaggerated and proper brightness which justly belongs to its basis, one cannot say. Certain it was that Knight's disappointment at finding himself second, at Elfride's momentary equivoque, and at her reluctance to be candid, brought him to the verge of cynicism.

CHAPTER VI.

'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 medi-

tation. 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 that the concatenation of circumstance originated by Stephen Smith, when 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 filamentous 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 farther 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 farther, and thought more. And he 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. It was the head of a woman.

Knight recoiled.

He stood still for a moment, and collected his thoughts. The vicar's account of the fall of the tower had been 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.' And he set to work removing the superincumbent mass.

The other man, who had 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 Stranton, I think it would be better to carry her in that direction, instead of away from the town.'

'But is it not much farther to the first house we come to going that way, than to the vicarage or to the Crags?'

'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 that 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 Stranton 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 crazed 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?'

'O yes. I am Lord Luxellian. Who are you?'

'I am a man visiting at the Crags—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 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, it was 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 dispatched, 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 over-hanging the edge of the table, the end drooping, 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 earn-

estly 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 Stranton that very day, and was having an after-dinner chat with the doctor when Lord Luxel-

lian 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. Kirrs.

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 VII.

'YEA, HAPPY SHALL HE BE THAT REWARDETH THEE AS THOU HAST SERVED US.'

SIXTEEN hours had passed. Knight was entering the ladies' room at the Crags, 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, turned cold, murmured a few words, and left the room.

The letter was fastened with a black seal. 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-plat 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 matchless 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 low 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 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 Crags. 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?'

'O, nothing. Shall I resume the serious conversation I had with you last night? No, perhaps not; perhaps I had better not.'

'O, I cannot tell! How wretched 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. 'O, 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 whose you have accepted.'

She became very pale, and a rigid and desolate charactery 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 be-

tween 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 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, with the utmost distress in her eyes.

'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 a 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 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. O, 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. O, 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—were 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 fatal 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 doubtingly 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—O, 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.'

'O no; indeed, I will not.'

'And then I am going to Stranton. 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 VIII.

'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 the metropolis, 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, previous 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 the neck of Knight, 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—O, 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. Kirrs, 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? O, 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. Swan-

court 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 child-like, 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 ori-

ginally 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 purity 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, and that with it had gone the self-respect which had compensated for the lack of self-gratification. Poor little Elfride, instead of having, 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 unchary 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 IX.

'THE PENNIE'S THE JEWEL THAT BEAUTIFIES A'.'

'I CAN'T think what's coming to these St. Kirrs shop-people nohow at all.'

'With their "How-d'ye-do's," do you mane?'

'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 Maria on a Saturday evening in the spring which followed Knight's departure from England. Stephen had long since returned to India; and the wrinkled couple themselves had migrated from Lord Luxellian's park at Endelstow to a comfortable roadside dwell-

ing about a mile out of St. Kirrs, 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 upright gold so many years in the town, they'd 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?'

'Ay, the brazen ones would. The quiet-cool would glare over the top of me head, past me side, over me shoulder, but never meet me eye. The gentle-modest would turn their faces south if I were coming east, flit down a passage if I was about to halve the pavement with them. There's that Joakes's wife—knew me a girl—married a poor little calico-needles-and-pins sort of drapery man, with nothing between him and starvation but his counter and yard mea-

sure. They scrimped and they pimped in that mite of a shop; entreated for my custom; and so they got on, till he's now Lord Mayor of St. Kirrs; and as for she, she's Lord——'

'Lord knows what, you may as well say.'

'Well, that woman, after talking to me by the half-hour in her shop, and getting her shop-maids to push all sorts of rubbish into my hands, which I have bought only to oblige them many a time, has met me an hour after, when sunning herself among her dress acquaintance on the pavement, looked as if she'd been shot at catching sight of me, with my honest bundles and baskets a-coming along, and edged all in a consternation round the corner, to escape meeting and speaking to me. You see they can't afford very well to do the stranger to your face, for fear of losing your custom, so they wamble off. There was the spruce young bookseller would play the same tricks; the butcher's daughters; the upholsterer's young

men. Hand in glove when out of sight with you; but ready to spend money rather than speak when cutting their dash outside the door.'

'True enough, Mariar.'

'Well, to-day 'tis all different. I'd no sooner got to market than that same miserable Mother 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 even-ashes together in Benvill Lane?" There's no knowing what you may need, so I answered the woman civil. I hadn't got to the corner before that young grocer, Sweet, who's quite the dand, 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 on't?'

'Can't say; unless 'tis repentance.'

'Repentance! was there ever such a fool as you, John? Did anybody ever repent wi' money in's pocket?'

'Now, I've been thinking too,' said John, passing over the query as hardly pertinent, 'that I've had more loving-kindness from those large-windered gentry 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 were, to shake hands with me—so 'a did. Having on my working clothes, I thought 'twas odd. Ay, and there were Porphinham.'

'Who's he?'

'Why, the music man in North-street, who d'sell drums, trumpets, and fiddles, and grate varnished pehanners. He was talking to Tinkleton, that very small bachelor-man with money in the funds. I was going by, I'm sure, without thinking or ex-

pecting a nod from men of that class when I was in my working clothes—'

'You always will go poking into town in your working clothes. Beg ye to change how I will, 'tis no use.'

'Well, however, I were in my working clothes. Porphinham seed me. "Ah, Mr. Smith! a fine morning; excellent weather for building," says he, out as loud and friendly as if I'd met 'em in some deep hollow, where nobody could have seen him speak at all. 'Twas odd; for Porphinham is one of the very ringleaders of the uppish 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. Trigg upon my arm directly my assistant came back from tea, and out we came. And seeing your

beautiful crocuses in such a bloom, we've took 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. Trigg, the gentleman-barber, and his lady. Till to-day they'd have fallen over us afore they'd have spoke, even out here in the country, leave alone on the pavement.'

John Smith, staggered in mind, went out of doors and looked over the garden gate, to collect his astounded ideas. He had not been there two minutes when wheels were heard, and a carriage and pair rolled along the road. A distinguished-looking female, with a demeanour somewhere between that of a duchess and an honourable, 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 congradgulate you and Mrs. Smith upon the happiness you must enjoy. Ah!—eh—good evening. Joseph, you may drive on.'

And the carriage rolled away towards St. Kirrs.

Out rushed Mrs. Smith from behind a laurel-bush, where she had squatted, listening.

'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! The ignorance of the Smith family, I never! You *might* say the proprietor of the Falcon Hotel's lady, and cost no more. The St. Kirrs 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. Kirrs.

By this time Mr. and Mrs. Trigg 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. Trigg. How is it all you gentlemen-shopmen be so friendly to-day?" Hey? 'Twould sound right and sensible, wouldn't it, Mariar?'

'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 gentleman-barber, advancing.

'Ah, 'tis Stephen—I knew it!' cried Mrs. Smith triumphantly.

'We don't know particulars,' said John eagerly.

'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-Hero Club, which lately presented him with a beautiful silver smoking service and embossed set of spittoons, for his able support of the Soul-above-Shops Association; which I am happy to say we have started in opposition to the old Honour-your-Betters Society, kept up by the country squires.'

'And what about Stephen?' screamed Mrs. Smith ecstatically, cutting a caper.

'Why, your son has been feeted 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, cathedral, hospitals, colleges, halls, fortifications, by the general consent of the

ruling powers, Christian, Pagan, and Devilish, all alike.'

'"Twas sure to come to the boy,' said Mrs. Smith grandly.

'"Tis in yesterday's *Kirrs Chronicle;* and our worthy mayor in the chair introduced the subject into his speech last night in a masterly manner. "Yes," said he, "St. Kirrs has her glories, gentlemen. And I blush with pleasure when I find recorded in to-day's paper the intellectual and artistic prowess of our friend Mr. Stephen Smith, son of Mr. John Smith, so well known to us all. Stratford has her Shakespeare, Penzance has her Davy, Bristol has her Chatterton, London has her Heaven-knows-who, and St. Kirrs has her Smith. Yes, fellow townsmen," he went on in the chair, "we may well be proud to find that Mr. John Smith, to whom, humble in life as he is, *I am related on the mother's side*, was a native of this town—"'

'Not at all!' said John. 'I wer born in

Snoke's Hut, Duddlecome-lane, half a mile out of St. Kirrs; I'll take my oath I wer!'

'Half a mile's nothing where glory's concerned; don't be so foolish particular, John! Quarrel wi' your own bread and cheese—that's you. 'Twas very good of the worthy mayor in the chair, I'm sure.'

'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 years, 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 down 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 the boy, 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 hopeless-like. So don't try to know anything about her, and we can't answer his questions. She may die out of him then.'

'That shall be it,' said John.

CHAPTER X.

'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, analysed 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 undertaken it, he went farther,

and lingered about Ferrara, Padua, and Pisa. Satiated with mediævalism, he tried Rome. 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 Thermopylæ and Salamis, to run through the facts and traditions of the Second Invasion—the result of his endeavours being all more or less a failure. 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 un-

disturbed 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 with weather-stained faces 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 to be going on in both. They collected their thoughts, 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. Kirrs last year. I fancy I saw something of the sort in the papers.'

'Yes; I believe something was said about me. People will, you know.'

'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 casual 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 even 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. . . . O, 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.'

'O, 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 pass all the bounds of 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. Kirrs 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 XI.

'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 affective 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 were 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 meet-

ing 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 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 hanker-

ing 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 were 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 crescent sense of its necessity. Stephen gave the rein to his imagination, and

felt more intensely than he had 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 in general, 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 modern architect's experience, who travels with his eyes open. Among these occasionally appeared rough delineations of mediæval 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 now initiated an adjustment of many things. Knight had recognised 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 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 for not doing that.'

'O, 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 know 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 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 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 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 poor 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 as by a gymnastic feat.

'O, 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. Kirrs at last—were detailed. And he told how a village woman named Jethway was the only person who recognised them, either going or coming; and how dreadfully this terrified Elfride. He told how he waited in the fields whilst his 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 the farther end.

'What did you say?' said Stephen, turning round.

'Say? Did I say anything? O, 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 farther 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 com-

panion 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 farther?'

'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 supper surely? Why 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 recognising. Stephen was but a boy to him. Where the great grief lay was, in perceiving that the very innocence of El-

fride 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 a while 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?

We must remember that 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 by rail from St. Kirrs to Stranton, 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 hereto-

fore, standing on his own bottom; and the definite position in which he had rooted himself nullified all suckers of derivation from peasant ancestors. He had become illustrious, even *sanguine clarus*, judging from the tone of the worthy mayor of St. Kirrs.

CHAPTER XII.

'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. Kirrs 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 the 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 meeting, another to Knight apologising 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 Stranton; 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 wait-

ing, 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.'

Never were the selfishness of love and the cruelty of jealousy more clearly exemplified than 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 richly-finished 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 con-

cluded, 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.'

'O 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 recognised 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 besides 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 Stranton? 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 Stranton train started.

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. Kirrs, 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 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 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 were 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 cared for you and have loved you too much, 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. Kirrs Station, I think. Are you going to get out?'

Knight's manner of returning to the matter in hand drew Stephen again into him-

self. 'No: I told you I was going to Stranton,' 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 Stranton. 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.

'O, 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 Stranton.'

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 characterise. Then Knight saw on its upper part forms against the sky like fir-trees 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, 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 recognise 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 cortége 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 XIII.

'WELCOME, PROUD LADY.'

HALF an hour has passed. Two miserable men are wandering in the darkness up the road from Stranton 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 wild 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 overcoat 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 come from Stranton,' he said. '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.

'O—I see!' said the smith, kindling with a chastened interest, and drawing close. 'Poor young lady—ah, a 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 town-house 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:

ELFRIDE,

Wife of Spenser Hugo Luxellian,

Fifteenth Baron Luxellian:

Died February 10, 1867.

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, farther, farther, till the chill darkness enclosed them round, and the

quiet sky asserted its presence overhead as a dim gray 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 farther?' 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 proceeded to retrace their steps towards Stranton, and 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 modernised. 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, recognised her as Unity, who had been parlour-maid at the vicarage and young-lady's-maid at the Crags.

'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 agony 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 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 Crags, 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.

"Who do you think I am going to be married to?" she said again.

"Mr. Knight, I suppose," said I.

"O!" 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. "Who 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. O, 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 best service I did her, poor child! When she was ready, I ran up-stairs 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? O, 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 valley from Stranton 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 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 recognised 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 gray still valley to Stranton.

THE END.

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