CHAPTER II

THE COLONEL AND SOME REFLECTIONS

Presently Morris heard a step upon the lawn, and turned to see his father sauntering towards him. Colonel Monk, C.B., was an elderly man, over sixty indeed, but still of an upright and soldierly bearing. His record was rather distinguished. In his youth he had served in the Crimea, and in due course was promoted to the command of a regiment of Guards. After this, certain diplomatic abilities caused him to be sent to one of the foreign capitals as military attache, and in reward of this service, on retiring, he was created a Companion of the Bath. In appearance he was handsome also; in fact, much better looking than his son, with his iron-grey hair, his clear-cut features, somewhat marred in effect by a certain shiftiness of the mouth, and his large dark eyes. Morris had those dark eyes also--they redeemed his face from plainness, for otherwise it showed no beauty, the features being too irregular, the brow too prominent, and the mouth too large. Yet it could boast what, in the case of a man at any rate, is better than beauty--spirituality, and a certain sympathetic charm. It was not the face which was so attractive, but rather the intelligence, the personality that shone through it, as the light shines through the horn panes of some homely, massive lantern. Speculative eyes of the sort that seem to search horizons and gather knowledge there, but shrink from the faces of women; a head of brown hair, short cut but untidy, an athletic, manlike form to which, bizarrely enough, a slight stoop, the stoop of a student, seemed

to give distinction, and hands slender and shapely as those of an Eastern--such were the characteristics of Morris Monk, or at least those of them that the observer was apt to notice.

"Hullo! Morris, are you star-gazing there?" said Colonel Monk, with a yawn. "I suppose that I must have fallen asleep after dinner--that comes of stopping too long at once in the country and drinking port. I notice you never touch it, and a good thing, too. There, my cigar is out. Now's the time for that new electric lighter of yours which I can never make work."

Morris fumbled in his pocket and produced the lighter. Then he said:

"I am sorry, father; but I believe I forgot to charge it."

"Ah! that's just like you, if you will forgive my saying so. You take any amount of trouble to invent and perfect a thing, but when it comes to making use of it, then you forget," and with a little gesture of impatience the Colonel turned aside to light a match from a box which he had found in the pocket of his cape.

"I am sorry," said Morris, with a sigh, "but I am afraid it is true. When one's mind is very fully occupied with one thing----" and he broke off.

"Ah! that's it, Morris, that's it," said the Colonel, seating himself

upon a garden chair; "this hobby-horse of yours is carrying you--to the devil, and your family with you. I don't want to be rough, but it is time that I spoke plain. Let's see, how long is it since you left the London firm?"

"Nine years this autumn," answered Morris, setting his mouth a little, for he knew what was coming. The port drunk after claret had upset his father's digestion and ruffled his temper. This meant that to him--Morris--Fate had appointed a lecture.

"Nine years, nine wasted years, idled and dreamt away in a village upon the eastern coast. It is a large slice out of a man's life, my boy. By the time that I was your age I had done a good deal," said his father, meditatively. When he meant to be disagreeable it was the Colonel's custom to become reflective.

"I can't admit that," answered Morris, in his light, quick voice--"I mean I can't admit that my time has either been idled away or wasted. On the contrary, father, I have worked very hard, as I did at college, and as I have always done, with results which, without boasting, I may fairly call glorious--yes, glorious--for when they are perfected they will change the methods of communication throughout the whole world." As he spoke, forgetting the sharp vexation of the moment, his face was irradiated with light--like some evening cloud on which the sun strikes suddenly.

Watching him out of the corner of his eye, even in that low moonlight, his father saw those fires of enthusiasm shine and die upon his son's face, and the sight vexed him. Enthusiasm, as he conceived, perhaps with justice, had been the ruin of Morris. Ceasing to be reflective, his tone became cruel.

"Do you really think, Morris, that the world wishes to have its methods of communication revolutionised? Aren't there enough telephones and phonograms and aerial telegraphs already? It seems to me that you merely wish to add a new terror to existence. However, there is no need to pursue an academical discussion, since this wretched machine of yours, on which you have wasted so much time, appears to be a miserable failure."

Now, to throw the non-success of his invention into the teeth of the inventor, especially when that inventor knows that it is successful really, although just at present it does not happen to work, is a very deadly insult. Few indeed could be deadlier, except, perhaps, that of the cruelty which can suggest to a woman that no man will ever look at her because of her plainness and lack of attraction; or the coarse taunt which, by shameless implication, unjustly accuses the soldier of cowardice, the diplomat of having betrayed the secrets of his country, or the lawyer of having sold his brief. All the more, therefore, was it to Morris's credit that he felt the lash sting without a show of temper.

"I have tried to explain to you, father," he began, struggling to free

his clear voice from the note of indignation.

"Of course you have, Morris; don't trouble yourself to repeat that long story. But even if you were successful--which you are not--er--I cannot see the commercial use of this invention. As a scientific toy it may be very well, though, personally, I should prefer to leave it alone, since, if you go firing off your thoughts and words into space, how do you know who will answer them, or who will hear them?"

"Well, father, as you understand all about it, it is no use my explaining any further. It is pretty late; I think I will be turning in."

"I had hoped," replied the Colonel, in an aggrieved voice, "that you might have been able to spare me a few minutes' conversation. For some weeks I have been seeking an opportunity to talk to you; but somehow your arduous occupations never seem to leave you free for ordinary social intercourse."

"Certainly," replied Morris, "though I don't quite know why you should say that. I am always about the place if you want me." But in his heart he groaned, guessing what was coming.

"Yes; but you are ever working at your chemicals and machinery in the old chapel; or reading those eternal books; or wandering about rapt in contemplation of the heavens; so that, in short, I seldom like to

trouble you with my mundane but necessary affairs."

Morris made no answer; he was a very dutiful son and humble-spirited. Those who pit their intelligences against the forces of Nature, and try to search out her secrets, become humble. He could not altogether respect his father; the gulf between them was too wide and deep. But even at his present age of three and thirty he considered it a duty to submit himself to him and his vagaries. Outside of other reasons, his mother had prayed him to do so almost with her last breath, and, living or dead, Morris loved his mother.

"Perhaps you are not aware," went on Colonel Monk, after a solemn pause, "that the affairs of this property are approaching a crisis."

"I know something, but no details," answered Morris. "I have not liked to interfere," he added apologetically.

"And I have not not liked to trouble you with such sordid matters," rejoined his parent, with sarcasm. "I presume, however, that you are acquainted with the main facts. I succeeded to this estate encumbered with a mortgage, created by your grandfather, an extravagant and unbusiness-like man. That mortgage I looked to your mother's fortune to pay off, but other calls made this impossible. For instance, the sea-wall here had to be built if the Abbey was to be saved, and half a mile of sea-walling costs something. Also very extensive repairs to the house were necessary, and I was forced to take three farms in hand when

I retired from the army fifteen years ago. This has involved a net loss of about ten thousand pounds, while all the time the interest had to be paid and the place kept up in a humble fashion."

"I thought that my uncle Porson took over the mortgage after my mother's death," interrupted Morris.

"That is so," answered his father, wincing a little; "but a creditor remains a creditor, even if he happens to be a relative by marriage. I have nothing to say against your uncle John, who is an excellent person in his way, and well-meaning. Of course, he has been justified, perfectly justified, in using his business abilities--or perhaps I should say instincts, for they are hereditary--to his own advantage. In fact, however, directly or indirectly, he has done well out of this property and his connection with our family--exceedingly well, both financially and socially. In a time of stress I was forced to sell him the two miles of sea-frontage building-land between here and Northwold for a mere song. During the last ten years, as you know, he has cut this up into over five hundred villa sites, which he has sold upon long lease at ground-rents that to-day bring in annually as much as he paid for the whole property."

"Yes, father; but you might have done the same. He advised you to before he bought the land."

"Perhaps I might, but I am not a tradesman; I do not understand these

affairs. And, Morris, I must remind you that in such matters I have had no assistance. I do not blame you any more than I blame myself--it is not in your line either--but I repeat that I have had no assistance."

Morris did not argue the point. "Well, father," he asked, "what is the upshot? Are we ruined?"

"Ruined? That is a large word, and an ugly one. No, we are no more ruined than we have been for the last half-dozen years, for, thank Heaven, I still have resources and--friends. But, of course, this place is in a way expensive, and you yourself would be the last to pretend that our burdens have been lessened by--your having abandoned the very strange profession which you selected, and devoted yourself to researches which, if interesting, must be called abstract----"

"Forgive me, father," interrupted Morris with a ring of indignation in his voice; "but you must remember that I put you to no expense. In addition to what I inherited from my mother, which, of course, under the circumstances I do not ask for, I have my fellowship, out of which I contribute something towards the cost of my living and experiments, that, by the way, I keep as low as possible."

"Of course, of course," said the Colonel, who did not wish to pursue this branch of the subject, but his son went on:

"You know also that it was at your express wish that I came to live here

at Monksland, as for the purposes of my work it would have suited me much better to take rooms in London or some other scientific centre."

"Really, my dear boy, you should control yourself," broke in his father. "That is always the way with recluses; they cannot bear the slightest criticism. Of course, as you were going to devote yourself to this line of research it was right and proper that we should live together. Surely you would not wish at my age that I should be deprived of the comfort of the society of an only child, especially now that your mother has left us?"

"Certainly not, father," answered Morris, softening, as was his fashion at the thought of his dead mother.

Then came a pause, and he hoped that the conversation was at end; a vain hope, as it proved.

"My real object in troubling you, Morris," continued his father, presently, "was very different to the unnecessary discussions into which we have drifted."

His son looked up, but said nothing. Again he knew what was coming, and it was worse than anything that had gone before.

"This place seems very solitary with the two of us living in its great rooms. I, who am getting an old fellow, and you a student and a

recluse--no, don't deny it, for nowadays I can barely persuade you to attend even the Bench or a lawn-tennis party. Well, fortunately, we have power to add to our numbers; or at least you have. I wish you would marry, Morris."

His son turned sharply, and answered:

"Thank you, father, but I have no fancy that way."

"Now, there's Jane Rose, or that handsome Eliza Layard," went on the Colonel, taking no notice. "I have reason to know that you might have either of them for the asking, and they are both good women without a breath against them, and, what in the state of this property is not without importance, very well to do. Jane gets fifty thousand pounds down on the day of her marriage, and as much more, together with the place, upon old Lady Rose's death; while Miss Layard--if she is not quite to the manner born--has the interest in that great colliery and a rather sickly brother. Lastly--and this is strange enough, considering how you treat them--they admire you, or at least Eliza does, for she told me she thought you the most interesting man she had ever met."

"Did she indeed!" ejaculated Morris. "Why, I have only spoken three times to her during the last year."

"No doubt, my dear boy, that is why she thinks you interesting. To her you are a mine of splendid possibilities. But I understand that you

don't like either of them."

"No, not particularly--especially Eliza Layard, who isn't a lady, and has a vicious temper--nor any young woman whom I have ever met."

"Do you mean to tell me candidly, Morris, that at your age you detest women?"

"I don't say that; I only say that I never met one to whom I felt much attracted, and that I have met a great many by whom I was repelled."

"Decidedly, Morris, in you the strain of the ancestral fish is too predominant. It isn't natural; it really isn't. You ought to have been born three centuries ago, when the old monks lived here. You would have made a first-class abbot, and might have been canonised by now. Am I to understand, then, that you absolutely decline to marry?"

"No, father; I don't want you to understand anything of the sort. If I could meet a lady whom I liked, and who wouldn't expect too much, and who was foolish enough to wish to take me, of course I should marry her, as you are so bent upon it."

"Well, Morris, and what sort of a woman would fulfil the conditions, to your notion?"

His son looked about him vaguely, as though he expected to find his

ideal in some nook of the dim garden.

"What sort of a woman? Well, somebody like my cousin Mary, I suppose--an easy-going person of that kind, who always looks pleasant and cool."

Morris did not see him, for he had turned his head away; but at the mention of Mary Porson's name his father started, as though someone had pricked him with a pin. But Colonel Monk had not commanded a regiment with some success and been a military attache for nothing; having filled diplomatic positions, public and private, in his time, he could keep his countenance, and play his part when he chose. Indeed, did his simpler-minded son but know it, all that evening he had been playing a part.

"Oh! that's your style, is it?" he said. "Well, at your age I should have preferred something a little different. But there is no accounting for tastes; and after all, Mary is a beautiful woman, and clever in her own way. By Jove! there's one o'clock striking, and I promised old Charters that I would always be in bed by half-past eleven. Good night, my boy. By the way, you remember that your uncle Porson is coming to Seaview to-morrow from London, and that we are engaged to dine with him at eight. Fancy a man who could build that pretentious monstrosity and call it Seaview! Well, it will condemn him to the seventh generation; but in this world one must take people as one finds them, and their houses, too. Mind you lock the garden door when you come in. Good night."

"Really," thought Colonel Monk to himself as he took off his dress-shoes and, with military precision, set them side by side beneath a chair, "it does seem a little hard on me that I should be responsible for a son who is in love with a damned, unworkable electrical machine. And with his chances--with his chances! Why he might have been a second secretary in the Diplomatic Service by now, or anything else to which interest could help him. And there he sits hour after hour gabbling down a little trumpet and listening for an answer which never comes--hour after hour, and month after month, and year after year. Is he a genius, or is he an idiot, or a moral curiosity, or simply useless? I'm hanged if I know, but that's a good idea about Mary; though, of course, there are things against it. Curious that I should never have considered the matter seriously before--because of the cousinship, I suppose. Would she have him? It doesn't seem likely, but you can never know what a woman will or will not do, and as a child she was very fond of Morris. At any rate the situation is desperate, and if I can, I mean to save the old place, for his sake and our family's, as well as my own."

He went to the window, and, lifting a corner of the blind, looked out. "There he is, still staring at the sea and the sky, and there I daresay he will be till dawn. I bet he has forgotten all about Mary now, and is thinking of his electrical machine. What a curiosity! Good heavens; what a curiosity! Ah, I wonder what they would have made of him in my old mess five and thirty years ago?" And quite overcome by this reflection, the Colonel shook his grizzled head, put out the candle, and retired to

rest.

His father was right. The beautiful September dawn was breaking over the placid sea before Morris brushed the night dew from his hair and cloak, and went in by the abbot's door.

What was he thinking of all the time? He scarcely knew. One by one, like little clouds in the summer sky, fancies arose in his mind to sail slowly across its depth and vanish upon an inconclusive and shadowy horizon. Of course, he thought about his instruments; these were never absent from his heart. His instinct flew back to them as an oasis, as an island of rest in the wilderness of this father's thorny and depressing conversation. The instruments were disappointing, it is true, at present; but, at any rate, they did not dwell gloomily upon impending ruin or suggest that it was his duty to get married. They remained silent, distressingly silent indeed.

Well, as the question of marriage had been started, he might as well face it out; that is, argue it in his mind, reduce it to its principles, follow it to its issues in a reasonable and scientific manner. What were the facts? His family, which, by tradition, was reported to be Danish in its origin, had owned this property for several hundred years, though how they came to own it remained a matter of dispute. Some said the Abbey and its lands were granted to a man of the name of Monk by Henry

VIII., of course for a consideration. Others held, and evidence existed in favour of this view, that on the dissolution of the monastery the abbot of the day, a shrewd man of easy principles, managed to possess himself of the Chapter House and further extensive hereditaments, of course with the connivance of the Commissioners, and, providing himself with a wife, to exchange a spiritual for a temporal dignity. At least this remained certain, that from the time of Elizabeth onwards Morris's forefathers had been settled in the old Abbey house at Monksland; that the first of them about whom they really knew anything was named Monk, and that Monk was still the family name.

Now they were all dead and gone, and their history, which was undistinguished, does not matter. To come to the present day. His father succeeded to a diminished and encumbered estate; indeed, had it not been for the fortune of his mother, a Miss Porson and one of a middle class and business, but rather wealthy family, the property must have been sold years before. That fortune, however, had long ago been absorbed--or so he gathered--for his father, a brilliant and fashionable army officer, was not the man to stint himself or to nurse a crippled property. Indeed, it was wonderful to Morris how, without any particular change in their style of living, which, if unpretentious, was not cheap, in these bad times they had managed to keep afloat at all.

Unworldly as Morris might be, he could easily guess why his father wished that he should marry, and marry well. It was that he might bolster up the fortunes of a shattered family. Also--and this touched

him, this commanded his sympathy--he was the last of his race. If he died without issue the ancient name of Monk became extinct, a consummation from which his father shrank with something like horror.

The Colonel was a selfish man--Morris could not conceal it, even from himself--one who had always thought of his own comfort and convenience first. Yet, either from idleness or pride, to advance these he had never stooped to scheme. Where the welfare of his family was concerned, however, as his son knew, he was a schemer. That desire was the one real and substantial thing in a somewhat superficial, egotistic, and finessing character.

Morris saw it all as he leaned there upon the railing, staring at the mist-draped sea, more clearly, indeed, than he had ever seen it before. He understood, moreover, what an unsatisfactory son he must be to a man like his father--if it had tried, Providence could hardly have furnished him with offspring more unsuitable. The Colonel had wished him to enter the Diplomatic Service, or the Army, or at least to get himself called to the Bar; but although a really brilliant University career and his family influence would have given him advantages in any of these professions, he had declined them all. So, following his natural bent, he became an electrician, and now, abandoning the practical side of that modest calling, he was an experimental physicist, full of deep but unremunerative lore, and--an unsuccessful inventor. Certainly he owed something to his family, and if his father wished that he should marry, well, marry he must, as a matter of duty, if for no other reason. After

all, the thing was not pressing; for it it came to the point, what woman was likely to accept him? All he had done to-night was to settle the general principles in his own mind. When it became necessary--if ever--he could deal with the details.

And yet this sort of marriage which was proposed to him, was it not an unholy business? He cared little for women, having no weakness that way, probably because of the energy which other young men gave to the pursuit of them was in his case absorbed by intense and brain-exhausting study. Therefore he was not a man who if left to himself, would marry, as so many do, merely in order to be married; indeed, the idea to him was almost repulsive. Had he been a woman-hater, he might have accepted it more easily, for then to him one would have been as the other. But the trouble was that he knew and felt that a time might come when in his eyes one woman would be different from all others, a being who spoke not to his physical nature only, if at all, but to the core within him. And if that happened, what then?

Look, the sun was rising. On the eastern sky of a sudden two golden doors had opened in the canopy of night, and in and out of them seemed to pass glittering, swift-winged things, as souls might tread the Gate of Heaven. Look, too, at the little clouds that in an unending stream floated out of the gloom--travellers pressed onwards by a breath of destiny. They were leaden-hued, all of them, black, indeed, at times, until they caught the radiance, and for a while became like the pennons of an angel's wings. Then one by one the glory overtook and embraced

them, and they melted into it to be seen no more.

What did the sight suggest to him? That it was worth while, perhaps, to be a mere drift of cloud, storm-driven and rain-laden in the bitter Night of Life, if the Morning of Deliverance brought such transformation on its wings. That beyond some such gates as these, gates that at times, greatly daring, he longed to tread, lay the answer to many a mystery. Amongst other things, perhaps, there he would learn the meaning of true marriage, and why it is denied to most dwellers of the earth. Without a union of the spirit was there indeed any marriage as it should be understood? And who in this world could hope to find his fellow spirit?

See, the sun had risen, the golden gates were shut. He had been dreaming, and was chilled to the bone. Wretchedness, mental and bodily, took hold of him. Well, often enough such is the fate of those who dream; those who turn from their needful, daily tasks to shape an angel out of this world's clay, trusting to some unknown god to give it life and spirit.