CHAPTER IV

MARY PREACHES AND THE COLONEL PREVAILS

A fortnight had gone by, and during this time Morris was a frequent visitor at Seaview. Also his Cousin Mary had come over twice or thrice to lunch, with her father or without him. Once, indeed, she had stopped all the afternoon, spending most of it in the workshop with Morris. This workshop, it may be remembered, was the old chapel of the Abbey, a very beautiful and still perfect building, finished in early Tudor times, in which, by good fortune, the rich stained glass of the east window still remained. It made a noble and spacious laboratory, with its wide nave and lovely roof of chestnut wood, whereof the corbels were seraphs, white-robed and golden-winged.

"Are you not afraid to desecrate such a place with your horrid vices--I mean the iron things--and furnace and litter?" asked Mary. She had sunk down upon an anvil, on which lay a newspaper, the first seat that she could find, and thence surveyed the strange, incongruous scene.

"Well, if you ask, I don't like it," answered Morris. "But there is no other place that I can have, for my father is afraid of the forge in the house, and I can't afford to build a workshop outside."

"It ought to be restored," said Mary, "with a beautiful organ in a carved case and a lovely alabaster altar and one of those perpetual

lamps of silver--the French call them 'veilleuses', don't they?--and the Stations of the Cross in carved oak, and all the rest of it."

Mary, it may be explained, had a tendency to admire the outward adornments of ritualism if not its doctrines.

"Quite so," answered Morris, smiling. "When I have from five to seven thousand to spare I will set about the job, and hire a high-church chaplain with a fine voice to come and say Mass for your benefit. By the way, would you like a confessional also? You omitted it from the list."

"I think not. Besides, what on earth should I confess, except being always late for prayers through oversleeping myself in the morning, and general uselessness?"

"Oh, I daresay you might find something if you tried," suggested Morris.

"Speak for yourself, please, Morris. To begin with your own account, there is the crime of sacrilege in using a chapel as a workshop. Look, those are all tombstones of abbots and other holy people, and under each tombstone one of them is asleep. Yet there you are, using strong language and whistling and making a horrible noise with hammers just above their heads. I wonder they don't haunt you; I would if I were they."

"Perhaps they do," said Morris, "only I don't see them."

"Then they can't be there."

"Why not? Because things are invisible and intangible it does not follow that they don't exist, as I ought to know as much as anyone."

"Of course; but I am sure that if there were anything of that sort about you would soon be in touch with it. With me it is different; I could sleep sweetly with ghosts sitting on my bed in rows."

"Why do you say that--about me, I mean?" asked Morris, in a more earnest voice.

"Oh, I don't know. Go and look at your own eyes in the glass--but I daresay you do often enough. Look here, Morris, you think me very silly--almost foolish--don't you?"

"I never thought anything of the sort. As a matter of fact, if you want to know, I think you a young woman rather more idle than most, and with a perfect passion for burying your talent in very white napkins."

"Well, it all comes to the same thing, for there isn't much difference between fool-born and fool-manufactured. Sometimes I wake up, however, and have moments of wisdom--as when I made you hear that thing, you know, thereby proving that it is all right, only useless--haven't I?"

"I daresay; but come to the point."

"Don't be in a hurry. It is rather hard to express myself. What I mean is that you had better give up staring."

"Staring? I never stared at you or anyone else, in my life!"

"Stupid Morris! By staring I mean star-gazing, and by star-gazing I mean trying to get away from the earth--in your mind, you know."

Morris ran his fingers through his untidy hair and opened his lips to answer.

"Don't contradict me," she interrupted in a full steady voice. "That's what you are thinking of half the day, and dreaming about all the night."

"What's that?" he ejaculated.

"I don't know," she answered, with a sudden access of indifference. "Do you know yourself?"

"I am waiting for instruction," said Morris, sarcastically.

"All right, then, I'll try. I mean that you are not satisfied with this world and those of us who live here. You keep trying to fashion

another--oh! yes, you have been at it from a boy, you see I have got a good memory, I remember all your 'vision stories'--and then you try to imagine its inhabitants."

"Well," said Morris, with the sullen air of a convicted criminal, "without admitting one word of this nonsense, what if I do?"

"Only that you had better look out that you don't find whatever it is you seek. It's a horrible mistake to be so spiritual, at least in that kind of way. You should eat and drink, and sleep ten hours as I do, and not go craving for vision till you can see, and praying for power until you can create."

"See! Create! Who? What?"

"The inhabitant, or inhabitants. Just think, you may have been building her up all this time, imagination by imagination, and thought by thought. Then her day might come, and all that you have put out piecemeal will return at once. Yes, she may appear, and take you, and possess you, and lead you----"

"She? Why she? and where?"

"To the devil, I imagine," answered Mary composedly, "and as you are a man one can guess the guide's sex. It's getting dark, let us go out. This is such a creepy place in the dark that it actually makes

me understand what people mean by nerves. And, Morris, of course you understand that I have only been talking rubbish. I always liked inventing fairy tales; you taught me; only this one is too grown up--disagreeable. What I really mean is that I do think it might be a good thing if you wouldn't live quite so much alone, and would go out a bit more. You are getting quite an odd look on your face; you are indeed, not like other men at all. I believe that it comes from your worrying about this wretched invention until you are half crazy over the thing. Any change there?"

He shook his head. "No, I can't find the right alloy--not one that can be relied upon. I begin to doubt whether it exists."

"Why don't you give it up--for a while at any rate?"

"I have. I made a novel kind of electrical hand-saw this spring, and sold the patent for 100 pounds and a royalty. There's commercial success for you, and now I am at work on a new lamp of which I have the idea."

"I am uncommonly glad to hear it," said Mary with energy. "And, I say, Morris, you are not offended at my silly parables, are you? You know what I mean."

"Not a bit. I think it is very kind of you to worry your head about an impossible fellow like me. And look here, Mary, I have done some dreaming in my time, it is true, for so far the world has been a place

of tribulation to me, and it is sick hearts that dream. But I mean to give it up, for I know as well as you do that there is only one end to all these systems of mysticism." Mary looked up.

"I mean," he went on, correcting himself, "to the mad attempt unduly and prematurely to cultivate our spiritual natures that we may live to and for them, and not to and for our natural bodies."

"Exactly my argument, put into long words," said Mary. "There will be plenty of time for that when we get down among those old gentlemen yonder--a year or two hence, you know. Meanwhile, let us take the world as we find it. It isn't a bad place, after all, at times, and there are several things worth doing for those who are not too lazy.

"Good-bye, I must be off; my bicycle is there against the railings. Oh, how I hate that machine! Now, listen, Morris; do you want to do something really useful, and earn the blessings of an affectionate relative? Then invent a really reliable electrical bike, that would look nice and do all the work, so that I could sit on it comfortably and get to a place without my legs aching as though I had broken them, and a red face, and no breath left in my body."

"I will think about it," he said; "indeed, I have thought of it already but the accumulators are the trouble."

"Then go on thinking, there's an angel; think hard and continually until

you evolve that blessed instrument of progression. I say, I haven't a lamp."

"I'll lend you mine," suggested Morris.

"No; other people's lamps always go out with me, and so do my own, for that matter. I'll risk it; I know the policeman, and if we meet I will argue with him. Good-bye; don't forget we are coming to dinner to-morrow night. It's a party, isn't it?"

"I believe so."

"What a bore, I must unpack my London dresses. Well, good-bye again."

"Good-bye, dear," answered Morris, and she was gone.

"'Dear,'" thought Mary to herself; "he hasn't called me that since I was sixteen. I wonder why he does it now? Because I have been scolding him, I suppose; that generally makes men affectionate."

For a while she glided forward through the grey twilight, and then began to think again, muttering to herself:

"You idiot, Mary, why should you be pleased because he called you 'dear'? He doesn't really care two-pence about you; his blood goes no quicker when you pass by and no slower when you stay away. Why do you

bother about him? and what made you talk all that stuff this afternoon? Because you think he is in a queer way, and that if he goes on giving himself up to his fancies he will become mad--yes, mad--because--Oh! what's the use of making excuses--because you are fond of him, and always have been fond of him from a child, and can't help it. What a fate! To be fond of a man who hasn't the heart to care for you or for any other woman. Perhaps, however, that's only because he hasn't found the right one, as he might do at any time, and then----"

"Where are you going to, and where's your light?" shouted a hoarse voice from the pathway on which she was unlawfully riding.

"My good man, I wish I knew," answered Mary, blandly.

Morris, for whom the day never seemed long enough, was a person who breakfasted punctually at half-past eight, whereas Colonel Monk, to whom--at any rate at Monksland--the day was often too long, generally breakfasted at ten. To his astonishment, however, on entering the dining-room upon the morrow of his interview in the workshop with Mary, he found his father seated at the head of the table.

"This means a 'few words' with me about something disagreeable," thought Morris to himself as he dabbed viciously at an evasive sausage. He was not fond of these domestic conversations. Nor was he in the least

reassured by his father's airy and informed comments upon the contents of the "Globe," which always arrived by post, and the marvel of its daily "turnover" article, whereof the perpetual variety throughout the decades constituted, the Colonel was wont to say, the eighth wonder of the world. Instinct, instructed by experience, assured him that these were but the first moves in the game.

Towards the end of the meal he attempted retreat, pretending that he wanted to fetch something, but the Colonel, who was watching him over the top of the pink page of the "Globe," intervened promptly.

"If you have a few minutes to spare, my dear boy, I should like to have a chat with you," he said.

"Certainly, father," answered the dutiful Morris; "I am at your service."

"Very good; then I will light my cigar, and we might take a stroll on the beach, that is, after I have seen the cook about the dinner to-night. Perhaps I shall find you presently by the steps."

"I will wait for you there," answered Morris. And wait he did, for a considerable while, for the interview with the cook proved lengthy. Moreover, the Colonel was not a punctual person, or one who set an undue value upon his own or other people's time. At length, just as Morris was growing weary of the pristine but enticing occupation of making ducks

and drakes with flat pebbles, his father appeared. After "salutations," as they say in the East, he wasted ten more minutes in abusing the cook, ending up with a direct appeal for his son's estimate of her capacities.

"She might be better and she might be worse," answered Morris, judicially.

"Quite so," replied the Colonel, drily; "the remark is sound and applies to most things. At present, however, I think that she is worse; also I hate the sight of her fat red face. But bother the cook, why do you think so much about her; I have something else to say."

"I don't think," said Morris. "She doesn't excite me one way or the other, except when she is late with my breakfast."

Then, as he expected, after the cook came the crisis.

"You will remember, my dear boy," began the Colonel, affectionately, "a little talk we had a while ago."

"Which one, father?"

"The last of any importance, I believe. I refer to the occasion when you stopped out all night contemplating the sea; an incident which impressed it upon my memory."

Morris looked at him. Why was the old gentleman so inconveniently observant?

"And doubtless you remember the subject?"

"There were a good many subjects, father; they ranged from mortgages to matrimony."

"Quite so, to matrimony. Well, have you thought any more about it?"

"Not particularly, father. Why should I?"

"Confound it, Morris," exclaimed the Colonel, losing patience; "don't chop logic like a petty sessions lawyer. Let's come to the point."

"That is my desire," answered Morris; and quite clearly there rose up before him an inconsequent picture of his mother teaching him the Catechism many, many years ago. Thereat, as was customary with his mind when any memory of her touched it, his temper softened like iron beneath the influence of fire.

"Very good, then what do you think of Mary as a wife?"

"How should I know under the circumstances?"

The Colonel fumed, and Morris added, "I beg your pardon, I understand

what you mean."

Then his father came to the charge.

"To be brief, will you marry her?"

"Will she marry me?" asked Morris. "Isn't she too sensible?"

His father's eye twinkled, but he restrained himself. This, he felt, was not an occasion upon which to indulge his powers of sarcasm.

"Upon my word, if you want my opinion, I believe she will; but you have

to ask her first. Look here, my boy, be advised by me, and do it as soon as possible. The notion is rather new to me, I admit; but, taking her all round, where would you find a better woman? You and I don't always agree about things; we are of a different generation, and look at the world from different standpoints. But I think that at the bottom we respect each other, and I am sure," he added with a touch of restrained dignity, "that we are naturally and properly attached to each other. Under these circumstances, and taking everything else into consideration, I am convinced also that you will give weight to my advice. I assure you that I do not offer it lightly. It is that you should marry your cousin Mary."

"There is her side of the case to be considered," suggested Morris.

"Doubtless, and she is a very shrewd and sensible young woman under all her 'dolce far niente' air, who is quite capable of consideration."

"I am not worthy of her," his son broke in passionately.

"That is for her to decide. I ask you to give her an opportunity of expressing an opinion."

Morris looked at the sea and sky, then he looked at his father standing before him in an attitude that was almost suppliant, with head bowed, hands clasped, and on his clear-cut face an air of real sincerity. What right had he to resist this appeal? He was heart-whole, without any kind of complication, and for his cousin Mary he had true affection and respect. Moreover, they had been brought up together. She understood him, and in the midst of so much that was uncertain and bewildering she seemed something genuine and solid, something to which a man could cling. It may not have been a right spirit in which to approach this question of marriage, but in the case of a young man like Morris, who was driven forward by no passion, by no scheme even of personal advancement, this substitution of reason for impulse and instinct was perhaps natural.

"Very well, I will," he answered; "but if she is wise, she won't."

His father turned his head away and sighed softly, and that sigh seemed

to lift a ton's weight off his heart.

"I am glad to hear it," he answered simply, "the rest must settle itself. By the way, if you are going up to the house, tell the cook that I have changed my mind, we will have the soles fried with lemon; she always makes a mess of them 'au maitre d'hotel.'"