

## CHAPTER V

### A PROPOSAL AND A PROMISE

Although it consisted of but a dozen people, the dinner-party at the Abbey that night was something of a function. To begin with, the old refectory, with its stone columns and arches still standing as they were in the pre-Reformation days, lit with cunningly-arranged and shaded electric lights designed and set up by Morris, was an absolutely ideal place in which to dine. Then, although the Monk family were impoverished, they still retained the store of plate accumulated by past generations. Much of this silver was old and very beautiful, and when set out upon the great side-boards produced an affect well suited to that chamber and its accessories. The company also was pleasant and presentable. There were the local baronet and his wife; the two beauties of the neighbourhood, Miss Jane Rose and Miss Eliza Layard, with their respective belongings; the clergyman of the parish, a Mr. Tomley, who was leaving the county for the north of England on account of his wife's health; and a clever and rising young doctor from the county town. These, with Mr. Porson and his daughter, made up the number who upon this particular night with every intention of enjoying themselves, sat down to that rather rare entertainment in Monksland, a dinner-party.

Colonel Monk had himself very carefully placed the guests. As a result, Morris, to whose lot it had fallen to take in the wealthy Miss Layard, a young lady of handsome but somewhat ill-tempered countenance, found

himself at the foot of the oblong table with his partner on one side and his cousin on the other. Mary, who was conducted to her seat by Mr. Layard, the delicate brother, an insignificant, pallid-looking specimen of humanity, for reasons of her own, not unconnected perhaps with the expected presence of the Misses Layard and Rose, had determined to look and dress her best that night. She wore a robe of some rich white silk, tight fitting and cut rather low, and upon her neck a single row of magnificent diamonds. The general effect of her sheeny dress, snow-like skin, and golden, waving hair, as she glided into the shaded room, suggested to Morris's mind a great white lily floating down the quiet water of some dark stream, and, when presently the light fell on her, a vision of a silver, mist-laden star lying low upon the ocean at the break of dawn. Later, after she became acquainted with these poetical imaginings, Mary congratulated herself and her maid very warmly on the fact that she had actually summoned sufficient energy to telegraph to town for this particular dress.

Of the other ladies present, Miss Layard was arrayed in a hot-looking red garment, which she imagined would suit her dark eyes and complexion. Miss Rose, on the contrary, had come out in the virginal style of muslin and blue bows, whereof the effect, unhappily, was somewhat marred by a fiery complexion, acquired as the result of three days' violent play at a tennis tournament. To this unfortunate circumstance Miss Layard, who had her own views of Miss Rose, was not slow in calling attention.

"What has happened to poor Jane?" she said, addressing Mary. "She looks

as though she had been red-ochred down to her shoulders."

"Who is poor Jane?" asked that young lady languidly. "Oh! you mean Miss Rose. I know, she has been playing in that tennis tournament at--what's the name of the place? Dad would drive me there this afternoon, and it made me quite hot to look at her, jumping and running and hitting for hour after hour. But she's awfully good at it; she won the prize. Don't you envy anybody who can win a prize at a tennis tournament, Miss Layard?"

"No," she answered sharply, for Miss Layard did not shine at Tennis. "I dislike women who go about what my brother calls 'pot-hunting' just as if they were professionals."

"Oh, do you? I admire them. It must be so nice to be able to do anything well, even if it's only lawn tennis. It's the poor failures like myself for whom I am so sorry."

"I don't admire anybody who can come to out to a dinner party with a head and neck like that," retorted Eliza.

"Why not? You can't burn, and that should make you more charitable. And I tie myself up in veils and umbrellas, which is absurd. Besides, what does it matter? You see, it is different with most of us; Miss Rose is so good-looking that she can afford herself these little luxuries."

"That is a matter of opinion," replied Miss Layard.

"Oh! I don't think so; at least, the opinion is all one way. Don't you think Miss Rose beautiful, Mr. Layard?" she said, turning to her companion.

"Ripping," said that gentleman, with emphasis. "But I wish she wouldn't beat one at tennis; it is an insult to the stronger sex."

Mary looked at him reflectively. His sister looked at him also.

"And I am sure that you think her beautiful, don't you, Morris?" went on the imperturbable Mary.

"Certainly, of course; lovely," he replied, with a vacuous stare at the elderly wife of the baronet.

"There, Miss Layard, now you collect the opinions of the gentlemen all along your side." And Mary turned away, ostensibly to talk to her cavalier; but really to find out what could possibly interest Morris so deeply in the person or conversation of Lady Jones.

Lady Jones was talking across the table to Mr. Tomley, the departing rector, a benevolent-looking person, with a broad forehead adorned like that of Father Time by a single lock of snowy hair.

"And so you are really going to the far coast of Northumberland, Mr. Tomley, to exchange livings with the gentleman with the odd name? How brave of you!"

Mr. Tomley smiled assent, adding: "You can imagine what a blow it is to me, Lady Jones, to separate myself from my dear parishioners and friends"--here he eyed the Colonel, with whom he had waged a continual war during his five years of residence in the parish, and added: "But we must all give way to the cause of duty and the necessities of health. Mrs. Tomley says that this part of the country does not agree with her, and is quite convinced that unless she is taken back to her native Northumberland air the worst may be expected."

"I fancy that it has arrived in that poor man's case," thought Mary to herself. Lady Jones, who also knew Mrs. Tomley and the power of her tongue, nodded her head sympathetically and said:

"Of course, of course. A wife's health must be the first consideration of every good man. But isn't it rather lonely up there, Mr. Tomley?"

"Lonely, Lady Jones?" the clergyman replied with energy, and shaking his white lock. "I assure you that the place is a howling desert; a great moor behind, and the great sea in front, and some rocks and the church between the two. That's about all, but my wife likes it because she used to stay at the rectory when she was a little girl. Her uncle was the incumbent there. She declares that she has never been well since she

left the parish."

"And what did you say is the name of the present inhabitant of this earthly paradise, the man with whom you have exchanged?" interrupted the Colonel.

"Fregelius--the Reverend Peter Fregelius."

"What an exceedingly odd name! Is he an Englishman?"

"Yes; but I think that his father was a Dane, and he married a Danish lady."

"Indeed! Is she living?"

"Oh, no. She died a great many years ago. The old gentleman has only one child left--a girl."

"What is her name?" asked someone idly, in a break of the general conversation, so that everybody paused to listen to his reply.

"Stella--Stella Fregelius; a very unusual girl."

Then the conversation broke out again with renewed vigour, and all that those at Morris's end of the table could catch were snatches such as:

"Wonderful eyes"; "Independent young person"; "Well read and musical";

"Oh, yes! poor as church mice, that's why he accepted my offer."

At this point the Doctor began a rather vehement argument with Mr. Porson as to the advisability of countervailing duties to force foreign nations to abandon the sugar bounties, and no more was heard of Mr. Tomley and his plans.

On the whole, Mary enjoyed that dinner-party. Miss Layard, somewhat sore after her first encounter, attempted to retaliate later.

But by this time Mary's argumentative energy had evaporated. Therefore, adroitly appealing to Mr. Layard to take her part, she retired from the fray till, seeing that it grew acrimonious, for this brother and sister did not love each other, she pretended to hear no more.

"Have you been stopping out all night again and staring at the sea, Morris?" she inquired; "because I understand it is a habit of yours. You seem so sleepy. I know that I must have looked just like you when that old political gentleman took me in to dinner, and I made an exhibition of myself."

"What was that?" asked Morris.

So she told him the story of her unlawful slumbers, and so amusingly that he burst out laughing and remained in an excellent mood for the rest of the feast, or at any rate until the ladies had departed. After

this event once more he became somewhat silent and distant.

It was not wonderful. To most men, except the very experienced, proposals are terrifying ordeals, and Morris had made up his mind, if he could find a chance, to propose to Mary that night. The thing was to be done, so the sooner he did it the better.

Then it would be over, one way or the other. Besides, and this was strange and opportune enough, never had he felt so deeply and truly attracted to Mary. Whether it was because her soft, indolent beauty showed at its best this evening in that gown and setting, or because her conversation, with its sub-acid tinge of kindly humour amused him, or--and this seemed more probable--because her whole attitude towards himself was so gentle and so full of sweet benevolence, he could not say. At any rate, this remained true, she attracted him more than any woman he had ever met, and sincerely he hoped and prayed that when he asked her to be his wife she might find it in her heart to say Yes.

The rest of the entertainment resembled that of most country dinner-parties. Conducted to the piano by the Colonel, who understood music very well, the talented ladies of the party, including Miss Rose, sang songs with more or less success, while Miss Layard criticised, Mary was appreciative, and the men talked. At length the local baronet's wife looked at the local baronet, who thereupon asked leave to order the carriage. This example the rest of the company followed in quick succession until all were gone except Mr. Porson and his daughter.



"Well, my dear," said Mr. Porson, "I suppose that we had better be off too, or you won't get your customary nine hours."

Mary yawned slightly and assented, asserting that she had utterly exhausted herself in defending Miss Rose from the attacks of her rival, Miss Layard.

"No, no," broke in the Colonel, "come and have a smoke first, John. I've got that old map of the property unrolled on purpose to show you, and I don't want to keep it about, for it fills up the whole place. Morris will look after Mary for half an hour, I daresay."

"Certainly," said Morris, but the heart within him sank to the level of his dress-shoes. Here was the opportunity for which he had wished, but as he could not be called a forward, or even a pushing lover, he was alarmed at its very prompt arrival. This answer to his prayers was somewhat too swift and thorough. There is a story of an enormously fat old Boer who was seated on the veld with his horse at his side, when suddenly a band of armed natives rushed to attack him. "Oh, God, help!" he cried in his native taal, as he prepared to heave his huge form into the saddle. Having thus invoked divine assistance, this Dutch Falstaff went at the task with such a will that in a trice he found himself not on the horse, but over it, lying upon his back, indeed, among the grasses. "O God!" that deluded burgher exclaimed, reproachfully, as the Kaffirs came up and speared him, "Thou hast helped

a great deal too much!"

At this moment Morris felt very much like this stout but simple dweller in the wilderness. He would have preferred to coquet with the enemy for a while from the safety of his saddle. But Providence willed it otherwise.

"Won't you come out, Mary?" he said, with the courage which inspires men in desperate situations. He felt that it would be impossible to say those words with the electric lights looking at him like so many eyes. The thought of it, even, made him warm all over.

"I don't know; it depends. Is there anything comfortable to sit on?"

"The deck chair," he suggested.

"That sounds nice. I have slumbered for hours in deck chairs. Look, there's a fur rug on that sofa, and here's my white cape; now you get your coat, and I'll come."

"Thank you, no; I don't want any coat; I am hot enough already."

Mary turned and looked him up and down with her wondering blue eyes.

"Do you really think it safe," she said, "to expose yourself to all sorts of unknown dangers in this unprotected condition?"

"Of course," he answered. "I am not afraid of the night air even in October."

"Very well, very well, Morris," she went on, and there was meaning in her voice; "then whatever happens don't blame me. It's so easy to be rash and thoughtless and catch a chill, and then you may become an invalid for life, or die, you know. One can't get rid of it again--at least, not often."

Morris looked at her with a puzzled air, and stepped through the window which he had opened, on to the lawn, whither, with a quaint little shrug of her shoulders, Mary followed him, muttering to herself:

"Now if he takes cold, it won't be my fault." Then she stopped, clasped her hands, and said, "Oh! what a lovely night. I am glad that we came out here."

She was right, it was indeed lovely. High in the heavens floated a bright half-moon, across whose face the little white-edged clouds drifted in quick succession, throwing their gigantic shadows to the world beneath. All silver was the sleeping sea where the moonlight fell upon it, and when this was eclipsed, then it was all jet. To the right and left, up to the very borders of the cliff, lay the soft wreaths of roke or land-fog, covering the earth as with a cloak of down, but pierced here and there by the dim and towering shapes of trees. Yet

although these curling wreaths of mist hung on the edges of the cliff like white water about to fall, they never fell, since clear to the sight, though separated from them by a gulf of translucent blackness, lay the yellow belt of sand up which, inch by inch, the tide was creeping.

And the air--no wind stirred it, though the wind was at work aloft--it was still and bright as crystal, and crisp and cold as new-iced wine, for the first autumn frost was falling.

They stood for a few moments looking at all these wonderful beauties of the mysterious night--which dwellers in the country so rarely appreciate, because to them they are common, daily things--and listening to the soft, long-drawn murmuring of the sea upon the shingle. Then they went forward to the edge of the cliff, but although Morris threw the fur rug over it Mary did not seat herself in the comfortable-looking deck chair. Her desire for repose had departed. She preferred to lean upon the low grey wall in whose crannies grew lichens, tiny ferns, and, in their season, harebells and wallflowers. Morris came and leant at her side; for a while they both stared at the sea.

"Pray, are you making up poetry?" she inquired at last.

"Why do you ask such silly questions?" he answered, not without indignation.

"Because you keep muttering to yourself, and I thought that you were trying to get the lines to scan. Also the sea, and the sky, and the night suggest poetry, don't they?"

Morris turned his head and looked at her.

"You suggest it," he said, with desperate earnestness, "in all that shining white, especially when the moon goes in. Then you look like a beautiful spirit new lit upon the edge of the world."

At first Mary was pleased, the compliment was obvious, and, coming from Morris, great. She had never heard him say so much as that before. Then she thought an instant, and the echo of the word "spirit" came back to her mind, and jarred upon it with a little sudden shock. Even when he had a lovely woman at his side must his fancy be wandering to these unearthly denizens and similes.

"Please, Morris," she said almost sharply, "do not compare me to a spirit. I am a woman, nothing more, and if it is not enough that I should be a woman, then----" she paused, to add, "I beg your pardon, I know you meant to be nice, but once I had a friend who went in for spirits--table-turning ones I mean--with very bad results, and I detest the name of them."

Morris took this rebuff better than might have been expected.

"Would you object if one ventured to call you an angel?" he asked.

"Not if the word was used in a terrestrial sense. It excites a vision of possibilities, and the fib is so big that anyone must pardon it."

"Very well, then; I call you that."

"Thank you, I should be delighted to return the compliment. Can you think of any celestial definition appropriate to a young gentleman with dark eyes?"

"Oh! Mary, please stop making fun of me," said Morris, with something like a groan.

"Why?" she asked innocently. "Besides I wasn't making fun. It's only my way of carrying on conversation; they taught it me at school, you know."

Morris made no answer; in fact, he did not know what on earth to say, or rather how to find the fitting words. After all, it was an accident and not his own intelligence that freed him from his difficulty. Mary moved a little, causing the white cloak, which was unfastened, to slip from her shoulders. Morris put out his hand to catch it, and met her hand. In another instant he had thrown his arm round her, drawn her to him, and kissed her on the lips. Then, abashed at what he had done, he let her go and picked up the cloak.

"Might I ask?" began Mary in her usual sweet, low tones. Then her voice broke, and her blue eyes filled with tears.

"I beg your pardon; I am a brute," began Morris, utterly abased by the sight of these tears, which glimmered like pearls in the moonlight, "but, of course, you know what I mean."

Mary shook her head vacantly. Apparently she could not trust herself to speak.

"Dear, will you take me?"

She made no answer; only, after pausing for some few seconds as though lost in thought, with a little action more eloquent than any speech, she leant herself ever so slightly towards him.

Afterwards, as she lay in his arms, words came to him readily enough:

"I am not worth your having," he said. "I know I am an odd fellow, not like other men; my very failings have not been the same as other men's. For instance--before heaven it is true--you are the first woman whom I ever kissed, as I swear to you that you shall be the last. Then, what else am I? A failure in the very work that I have chosen, and the heir to a bankrupt property! Oh! it is not fair; I have no right to ask you!"

"I think it quite fair, and here I am the judge, Morris." Then, sentence

by sentence, she went on, not all at once, but with breaks and pauses.

"You asked me just now if I loved you, and I told you--Yes. But you did not ask me when I began to love you. I will tell you all the same. I can't remember a time when I didn't; no, not since I was a little girl. It was you who grew away from me, not me from you, when you took to studying mysticism and aerophones, and were repelled by all women, myself included."

"I know, I know," he said. "Don't remind me of my dead follies. Some things are born in the blood."

"Quite so, and they remain in the bone. I understand. Morris, unless you maltreat me wilfully--which I am sure you would never do--I shall always understand."

"What are you afraid of?" he asked in a shaken voice. "I feel that you are afraid."

"Oh, one or two things; that you might overwork yourself, for instance. Or, lest you should find that after all you are more human than you imagine, and be taken possession of by some strange Stella coming out of nowhere."

"What do you mean, and why do you use that name?" he said amazed.



"What I say, dear. As for that name, I heard it accidentally at table to-night, and it came to my lips--of itself. It seemed to typify what I meant, and to suggest a wandering star--such as men like you are fond of following."

"Upon my honour," said Morris, "I will do none of these things."

"If you can help it, you will do none of them. I know it well enough. I hope and believe that there will never be a shadow between us while we live. But, Morris, I take you, risks and all, because it has been my chance to love you and nobody else. Otherwise, I should think twice; but love doesn't stop at risks."

"What have I done to deserve this?" groaned Morris.

"I cannot see. I should very much like to know," replied Mary, with a touch of her old humour.

It was at this moment that Colonel Monk, happening to come round the corner of the house, walking on the grass, and followed by Mr. Porson, saw a sight which interested him. With one hand he pointed it out to Porson, at the same moment motioning him to silence with the other. Then, taking his brother-in-law by the arm, he dragged him back round the corner of the house.

"They make a pretty picture there in the moonlight, don't they, John, my

boy?" he said. "Come, we had better go back into the study and talk over matters till they have done. Even the warmth of their emotions won't keep out the night air for ever."