CHAPTER VI

THE GOOD OLD DAYS

For the next month, or, to be accurate, the next five weeks, everything went merrily at Monk's Abbey. It was as though some cloud had been lifted off the place and those who dwelt therein. No longer did the Colonel look solemn when he came down in the morning, and no longer was he cross after he had read his letters. Now his interviews with the steward in the study were neither prolonged nor anxious; indeed, that functionary emerged thence on Saturday mornings with a shining countenance, drying the necessary cheque, heretofore so difficult to extract, by waving it ostentatiously in the air. Lastly, the Colonel did not seem to be called upon to make such frequent visits to his man of business, and to tarry at the office of the bank manager in Northwold. Once there was a meeting, but, contrary to the general custom, the lawyer and the banker came to see him in company, and stopped to luncheon. At this meal, moreover, the three of them appeared to be in the best of spirits.

Morris noted all these things in his quiet, observant way, and from them drew certain conclusions of his own. But he shrank from making inquiries, nor did the Colonel offer any confidences. After all, why should he, who had never meddled with his father's business, choose this moment to explore it, especially as he knew from previous experience that such investigations would not be well received? It was one of the

Colonel's peculiarities to keep his affairs to himself until they grew so bad that circumstances forced him to seek the counsel or the aid of others. Still, Morris could well guess from what mine the money was digged that caused so comfortable a change in their circumstances, and the solution of this mystery gave him little joy. Cash in consideration of an unconcluded marriage; that was how it read. To his sensitive nature the transaction seemed one of doubtful worth.

However, no one else appeared to be troubled, if, indeed, these things existed elsewhere than in his own imagination. This, Morris admitted, was possible, for their access of prosperity might, after all, be no more than a resurrection of credit, vivified by the news of his engagement with the only child of a man known to be wealthy. His uncle Porson, with a solemnity that was almost touching, had bestowed upon Mary and himself a jerky but earnest blessing before he drove home on the night of the dinner-party. He went so far, indeed, as to kiss them both; an example which the Colonel followed with a more finished but equally heartfelt grace.

Now his uncle John beamed upon him daily like the noonday sun. Also he began to take him into his confidence, and consult him as to the erection of houses, affairs of business, and investments. In the course of these interviews Morris was astonished, not to say dismayed, to discover how large were the sums of money as to the disposal of which he was expected to express opinions.

"You see, it will all be yours, my boy," said Mr. Porson one day, in explanation; "so it is best that you should know something of these affairs. Yes, it will all be yours, before very long," and he sighed.

"I trust that I shall have nothing to do with it for many years," blurted out Morris.

"Say months, say months," answered his uncle, stretching out his hands as though to push something from him. Then, to all appearances overcome by a sudden anguish, physical or mental, he turned and hurried from the room.

Taking them all together, those five weeks were the happiest that Morris had ever known. No longer was he profoundly dissatisfied with things in general, no longer ravaged by that desire of the moth for the star which in some natures is almost a disease. His outlook upon the world was healthier and more hopeful; for the first time he saw its wholesome, joyous side. Had he failed to do so, indeed, he must have been a very strange man, for he had much to make the poorest heart rejoice.

Thus Mary, always a charming woman, since her engagement had become absolutely delightful; witter, more wideawake, more beautiful. Morris could look forward to the years to be spent in her company not only without misgiving, but with a confidence that a while ago he would have thought impossible. Moreover, as good fortunes never come singly, his were destined to be multiplied. It was in those days after so many years

of search and unfruitful labour that at last he discovered a clue which in the end resulted in the perfection of the instrument that was the parent of the aerophone of commerce, and gave him a name among the inventors of the century which will not easily be forgotten.

Strangely enough it was Morris's good genius, Mary, who suggested the substance, or, rather, the mixture of substances, whereof that portion of the aerophone was finally constructed which is still known as the Monk Sound Waves Receiver. Whether, as she alleged, she made this discovery by pure accident, or whether, as seems possible, she had thought the problem out in her own feminine fashion with results that proved excellent, does not matter in the least. The issue remains the same. An apparatus which before would work only on rare occasions--and then without any certitude--between people in the highest state of sympathy or nervous excitement, has now been brought to such a stage of perfection that by its means anybody can talk to anybody, even if their interests are antagonistic, or their personal enmity bitter.

After the first few experiments with this new material Morris was not slow to discover that although it would need long and careful testing and elaboration, for him it meant, in the main, the realisation of his great dream, and success after years of failure. And--that was the strange part of it--this realisation and success he owed to no effort of his own, but to some chance suggestion made by Mary. He told her this, and thanked her as a man thanks one through whom he has found salvation. In answer she merely laughed, saying that she was nothing but the wire

along which a happy inspiration had reached his brain, and that more than this she neither wished, nor hoped, nor was capable of being.

Then suddenly on this happy, tranquil atmosphere which wrapped them about--like the sound of a passing bell at a child's feast--floated the first note of impending doom and death.

The autumn held fine and mild, and Mary, who had been lunching at the Abbey, was playing croquet with Morris upon the side lawn. This game was the only one for which she chanced to care, perhaps because it did not involve much exertion. Morris, who engaged in the pastime with the same earnestness that he gave to every other pursuit in which he happened to be interested, was, as might be expected, getting the best of the encounter.

"Won't you take a couple of bisques, dear?" he asked affectionately, after a while. "I don't like always beating you by such a lot."

"I'd die first," she answered; "bisques are the badge of advertised inferiority and a mark of the giver's contempt."

"Stuff!" said Morris.

"Stuff, indeed! As though it wasn't bad enough to be beaten at all; but to be beaten with bisques!"

"That's another argument," said Morris. "First you say you are too proud to accept them, and next that you won't accept them because it is worse to be defeated with points than without them."

"Anyway, if you had the commonest feelings of humanity you wouldn't beat me," replied Mary, adroitly shifting her ground for the third time.

"How can I help it if you won't have the bisques?"

"How? By pretending that you were doing your best, and letting me win all the same, of course; though if I caught you at it I should be furious. But what's the use of trying to teach a blunt creature like you tact? My dear Morris, I assure you I do not believe that your efforts at deception would take in the simplest-minded cow. Why, even Dad sees through you, and the person who can't impose upon my Dad----. Oh!" she added, suddenly, in a changed voice, "there is George coming through the gate. Something has happened to my father. Look at his face, Morris; look at his face!"

In another moment the footman stood before them.

"Please, miss, the master," he began, and hesitated.

"Not dead?" said Mary, in a slow, quiet voice. "Do not say that he is dead!"

"No, miss, but he has had a stroke of the heart or something, and the doctor thought you had better be fetched, so I have brought the carriage."

"Come with me, Morris," she said, as, dropping the croquet mallet, she flew rather than ran to the brougham.

Ten minutes later they were at Seaview. In the hall they met Mr. Charters, the doctor. Why was he leaving? Because----

"No, no," he said, answering their looks; "the danger is past. He seems almost as well as ever."

"Thank God!" stammered Mary. Then a thought struck her, and she looked up sharply and asked, "Will it come back again?"

"Yes," was his straightforward answer.

"When?"

"From time to time, at irregular periods. But in its fatal shape, as I hope, not for some years."

"The verdict might have been worse, dear," said Morris.

"Yes, yes, but to think that it has passed so near to him, and he

quite alone at the time. Morris," she went on, turning to him with an energy that was almost fierce, "if you won't have my father to live with us, I won't marry you. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, dear, you leave no room for misconception. By all means let him live with us--if he can get on with my father," he added meaningly.

"Ah!" she replied, "I never thought of that. Also I should not have spoken so roughly, but I have had such a shock that I feel inclined to treat you like--like--a toad under a harrow. So please be sympathetic, and don't misunderstand me, or I don't know what I shall say." Then by way of making amends, Mary put her arms round his neck and gave him a kiss "all of her own accord," saying, "Morris, I am afraid--I am afraid. I feel as if our good time was done."

After this the servant came to say that she might go up to her father's room, and that scene of our drama was at an end.

Mr. Porson owned a villa at Beaulieu, in the south of France, which he had built many years before as a winter house for his wife, whose chest was weak. Here he was in the habit of spending the spring months, more, perhaps, because of the associations which the place possessed for him than of any affection for foreign lands. Now, however, after this last attack, three doctors in consultation announced that it would be well for him to escape from the fogs and damp of England. So to Beaulieu he was ordered.

This decree caused consternation in various quarters. Mr. Porson did not wish to go; Mary and Morris were cast down for simple and elementary reasons; and Colonel Monk found this change of plan--it had been arranged that the Porsons should stop at Seaview till the New Year, which was to be the day of the marriage--inconvenient, and, indeed, disturbing. Once those young people were parted, reflected the Colonel in his wisdom, who could tell what might or might not happen?

In this difficulty he found an inspiration. Why should not the wedding take place at once? Very diplomatically he sounded his brother-in-law, to find that he had no opposition to fear in this quarter provided that Mary and her husband would join him at Beaulieu after a week or two of honeymoon. Then he spoke to Morris, who was delighted with the idea. For Morris had come to the conclusion that the marriage state would be better and more satisfactory than one of prolonged engagement.

It only remained, therefore, to obtain the consent of Mary, which would perhaps, have been given without much difficulty had her uncle been content to leave his son or Mr. Porson to ask it of her. As it chanced, this he was not willing to do. Porson, he was sure, would at once give way should his daughter raise any objection, and in Morris's tact and persuasive powers the Colonel had no faith.

In the issue, confident in his own diplomatic abilities, he determined to manage the affair himself and to speak to his niece. The mistake was

grave, for whereas she was as wax to her father or her lover, something in her uncle's manner, or it may have been his very personality, always aroused in Mary a spirit of opposition. On this occasion, too, that manner was not fortunate, for he put the proposal before her as a thing already agreed upon by all concerned, and one to which her consent was asked as a mere matter of form.

Instantly Mary became antagonistic. She pretended not to understand; she asked for reasons and explanations. Finally, she announced in idle words, beneath which ran a current of determination, that neither her father nor Morris could really wish this hurried marriage, since had they done so one or other of them would have spoken to her on the subject. When pressed, she intimated very politely, but in language whereof the meaning could hardly be mistaken, that she held this fixing of the date to be peculiarly her own privilege; and when still further pressed said plainly that she considered her father too ill for her to think of being married at present.

"But they both desire it," expostulated the Colonel.

"They have not told me so," Mary answered, setting her red lips.

"If that is all, they will tell you so soon enough, my dear girl."

"Perhaps, uncle, after they have been directed to do so, but that is not quite the same thing."

The Colonel saw that he had made a mistake, and too late changed his tactics.

"You see, Mary, your father's state of health is precarious; he might grow worse."

She tapped her foot upon the ground. Of these allusions to the possible, and, indeed, the certain end of her beloved father's illness, she had a kind of horror.

"In that event, that dreadful event," she answered, "he will need me, my whole time and care to nurse him. These I might not be able to give if I were already married. I love Morris very dearly. I am his for whatever I may be worth; but I was my father's before Morris came into my life, and he has the first claim upon me."

"What, then, do you propose?" asked the Colonel curtly, for opposition and argument bred no meekness in his somewhat arbitrary breast.

"To be married on New Year's Day, wherever we are, if Morris wishes it and the state of my father's health makes it convenient. If not, Uncle Richard, to wait till a more fitting season." Then she rose--for this conversation took place at Seaview--saying that it was time she should give her father his medicine.

Thus the project of an early marriage fell through; for, having once been driven into announcing her decision in terms so open and unmistakable, Mary would not go back on her word.

Morris, who was much disappointed, pleaded with her. Her father also spoke upon the subject, but though the voice was the voice of Mr. Porson, the arguments, she perceived, were the arguments of Colonel Monk. Therefore she hardened her heart and put the matter by, refusing, indeed, to discuss it at any length. Yet--and it is not the first time that a woman has allowed her whims to prevail over her secret wishes--in truth she desired nothing more than to be married to Morris so soon as it was his will to take her.

Finally, a compromise was arranged. There was to be no wedding at present, but the whole party were to go together to Beaulieu, there to await the development of events. It was arranged, moreover, by all concerned, that unless something unforeseen occurred to prevent it, the marriage should be celebrated upon or about New Year's Day.