CHAPTER XI

A MORNING SERVICE

Mr. Fregelius replied he was as well as could be expected; that the doctor said no complications were likely to ensue, but that here upon this very bed he must lie for at least two months. "That," he added, "is a sad thing to have to say to a man into whose house you have drifted like a log into a pool of the rocks."

"It is not my house, but my father's, who is at present in France," answered Morris. "But I can only say on his behalf that both you and your daughter are most welcome until you are well enough to move to the Rectory."

"Why should I not go there at once?" interrupted Stella. "I could come each day and see my father."

"No, no, certainly not," said Morris. "How could you live alone in that great, empty house?"

"I am not afraid of being alone," she answered, smiling; "but let it be as you like, Mr. Monk--at any rate, until you grow tired of us, and change your mind."

Then Mr. Fregelius told Morris what he had not yet heard--that when it

became known that they had deserted Stella, leaving her to drown in the sinking ship, the attentions of the inhabitants of Monksland to the cowardly foreign sailors became so marked that their consul at Northwold had thought it wise to get them out of the place as quickly as possible. While this story was in progress Stella left the room to speak to the nurse who had been engaged to look after her father at night.

Afterwards, at the request of Mr. Fregelius, Morris told the tale of his daughter's rescue. In the course of it he mentioned how he found her standing on the deck of the sinking ship and singing a Norse song, which she had informed him was an ancient death-dirge.

The old clergyman turned his head and sighed.

"What is the matter?" asked Morris.

"Nothing, Mr. Monk; only that song is unlucky in my family, and I hoped that she had forgotten it."

Morris looked at him blankly.

"You don't understand--how should you? But, Mr. Monk, there are strange things and strange people in this world, and I think that my daughter Stella is one of the strangest of them. Fey like the rest--only a fey Norse woman would sing in such a moment."

Again Morris looked at him.

"Oh, it is an old northern term, and means foreseeing, and foredoomed. To my knowledge her grandmother, her mother, and her sister, all three of them, sang or repeated that song when in some imminent danger to their lives, and all three of them were dead within the year. The coincidence is unpleasant."

"Surely," said Morris, with a smile, "you who are a clergyman, can scarcely believe in such superstition?"

"No, I am not superstitious, and I don't believe in it; but the thing recalls unhappy memories. They have been death-lovers, all of them. I never heard of a case of one of that family who showed the slightest fear at the approach of death; and some have greeted it with eagerness."

"Well," said Morris, "would not that mean only that their spiritual sight is a little clearer than ours, and their faith a little stronger? Theoretically, we should all of us wish to die."

"Quite so, yet we are human, and don't. But she is safe, thanks to you, who but for you would now be gone. My head is still weak from that blow--you must pay no attention to me. I think that I hear Stella coming; you will say nothing to her--about that song, I mean--will you? We never talk of it in my family."

When, still stiff and sore from his adventure in the open boat, Morris went to bed, it was clear to his mind after careful consideration that fortune had made him the host of an exceedingly strange couple. Of Mr. Fregelius he was soon able to form an estimate distinct enough, although, for aught he knew, it might be erroneous. The clergyman struck him as a person of some abilities who had been doomed to much disappointment and suffered from many sorrows. Doubtless his talents had not proved to be of a nature to advance him in the world. Probably, indeed--and here Morris's hazard was correct--he was a scholar and a bookworm without individuality, to whom fate had assigned minor positions in a profession, which, however sincere his faith, he was scarcely fitted to adorn.

The work of a clergyman in a country parish if it is to succeed, should be essentially practical, and this man was not practical. Clearly, thought Morris, he was one of those who beat their wings against the bars with the common result; it was the wings that suffered, the bars only grew a trifle brighter. Then it seemed that he had lost a wife to whom he was attached, and the child who remained to him, although he loved her and clung to her, he did not altogether understand. So it came about, perhaps, that he had fallen under the curses of loneliness and continual apprehension; and in this shadow where he was doomed to walk, flourished forebodings and regrets, drawing their strength from his starved nature like fungi from a tree outgrown and fallen in the forest.

Mr. Fregelius, so thought Morris, was timid and reticent, because he

dared not discover his heart, that had been so sorely trampled by Fate and Fortune. Yet he had a heart which, if he could find a confessor whom he could trust, he longed to ease in confidence. For the rest, the man's physical frame, not too robust at any time, was shattered, and with it his nerve--sudden shipwreck, painful accident, the fierce alternatives of hope and fear; then at last a delirium of joy at the recovery of one whom he thought dead, had done their work with him; and in this broken state some ancient, secret superstition became dominant, and, strive as he would to suppress it, even in the presence of a stranger, had burst from his lips in hints of unsubstantial folly.

Such was the father, or such he appeared to Morris, but of the daughter what could be said? Without doubt she was a woman of strange and impressive power. At this very moment her sweet voice, touched with that continual note of pleading, still echoed in his brain. And the dark, quiet eyes that now slept, and now shone large, as her thoughts fled through them, like some mysterious sky at night in which the summer lightning pulses intermittently! Who might forget those eyes that once had seen them? Already he wished to be rid of their haunting and could not. Then her beauty--how unusual it was, yet how rich and satisfying to the eye and sense; in some ways almost Eastern notwithstanding her Norse blood!

Often Morris had read or heard of the bewildering power of women, which for his part hitherto he had been inclined to attribute to shallow and very common causes, such as underlie all animate nature. Yet that of

Stella--for undoubtedly she had power--suggested another interpretation to his mind. Or was it, after all, nothing but a variant, one of the Protean shapes of the ancient, life-compelling mystery? And her strange chant, the song of which her father made light, but feared so much; her quick insight into the workings of his own thought; her courage in the face of danger and sharp physical miseries; her charm, her mastery. What was he to make of them? Lastly, why did he think so much about her? It was not his habit where strangers were concerned. And why had she awakened in his somewhat solitary and secluded mind a sympathy so unusual that it seemed to him that he had known her for years and not for hours?

Pondering these things and the fact that perhaps within the coming weeks he would find out their meaning, Morris went to sleep. When he awoke next morning his mood had changed. Somewhat vaguely he remembered his perturbations of the previous night indeed, but now they only moved him to a smile. Their reasons were so obvious. Such exaggerated estimates and thoughts follow strange adventures--and in all its details this adventure was very strange--as naturally as nightmares follow indigestion.

Presently Thomas came to call him, and brought up his letters, among them one from Mary containing nothing in particular, for, of course, it had been despatched before her telegram, but written in her usual humorous style, which made him laugh aloud.

There was a postscript to the letter screwed into the unoccupied space between the date line and the "Dearest Morris" at its commencement. It ran:

"How would you like to spend our honeymoon? In a yacht in the Mediterranean? I think that would do. There is nothing like solitude in a wretched little boat to promote mutual understanding. If your devotion could stand the strain of a dishevelled and seasick spouse, our matrimonial future has no terrors for your loving Mary."

As Morris read he ceased to laugh. "Yes," he thought to himself, "'solitude in a wretched little boat' does promote mutual understanding. I am not certain that it does not promote it too much." Then, with an access of irritation, "Bother the people! I wish I could be rid of them; the whole thing seems likely to become a worry."

Next he took up a letter from his father, which, when perused, did not entertain him in the least. There was nothing about Lady Rawlins in it, of whom he longed to hear, or thought that he did; nothing about that entrancing personality, the bibulous and violent Sir Jonah, now so meek and lamblike, but plenty, whole pages indeed, as to details connected with the estate. Also it contained a goodly sprinkling of sarcasms and grumblings at his, Morris's, bad management of various little matters which the Colonel considered important. Most of all, however, was his

parent indignant at his neglect to furnish him with details sufficiently ample of the progress of the new buildings. Lastly, he desired, by return of post, a verbatim report of the quarrel that, as he was informed, had occurred on the school board when a prominent Roman Catholic threatened to throw an inkstand at a dissenting minister who, coram populo, called him the son of "a Babylonian woman."

By the time that Morris had finished this epistle, and two others which accompanied it, he was in no mood for further reflections of an unpractical or dreamy nature. Who can wonder when it is stated that they contained, respectively, a summary demand for the amount of a considerable bill which he imagined he had paid, and a request that he would read a paper before a "Science Institute" upon the possibilities of aerial telephones, made by a very unpleasing lady whom he had once met at a lawn-tennis party? Indeed it would not be too much to say that if anyone had given him the opportunity he would have welcomed a chance to quarrel, especially with the lady of the local Institute. Thus, cured of all moral distempers, and every tendency to speculate on feminine charms, hidden or overt, did he descend to the Sabbath breakfast.

That morning Morris accompanied Stella to church, where the services were still being performed by a stop-gap left by Mr. Tomley. Here, again, Stella was a surprise to him, for now her demeanour, and at a little distance her appearance also, were just such as mark ninety-eight out of every hundred clergyman's daughters in the country. So quiet and reserved was she that anyone meeting her that morning might have

imagined that she was hurrying from the accustomed Bible-class to sit among her pupils in the church. This impression indeed was, as it were, certificated by an old-fashioned silk fichu that she had been obliged to borrow, which in bygone years had been worn by Morris's mother.

Once in church, however, matters changed. To begin with, finding it warm, Stella threw off the fichu, greatly to the gain of her personal appearance. Next, it became evident that the beauties of the ancient building appealed to her, which was not wonderful; for these old, seaside, eastern counties churches, relics of long past wealth and piety, are some of them among the most beautiful in the world. Then came the "Venite," of which here and there she sang a line or so, just one or two rich notes like those that a thrush utters before he bursts into full song. Rare as they might be, however, they caused those about her in the church to look at the strange singer wonderingly.

After this, in the absence of his father, Morris read the lessons, and although, being blessed with a good voice, this was a duty which he performed creditably enough, that day he went through it with a certain sense of nervousness. Why he was nervous at first he did not guess; till, chancing to glance up, he became aware that Miss Fregelius was looking at him out of her half-closed eyes. What is more, she was listening critically, and with much intenseness, whereupon, instantly, he made a mistake and put a false accent on a name.

In due course, the lessons done with, they reached the first hymn, which

was one that scarcely seemed to please his companion; at any rate, she shut the book and would not sing. In the case of the second hymn, however, matters were different. This time she did not even open the book. It was evident that she knew the words, perhaps among the most beautiful in the whole collection, by heart. The reader will probably be acquainted with them. They begin:

"And now, O Father, mindful of the love
That bought us, once for all, on Calvary's tree."

At first Stella sang quite low, as though she wished to repress her powers. Now, as it happened, at Monksland the choir was feeble, but inoffensive; whereas the organ was a good, if a worn and neglected instrument, suited to the great but sparsely peopled church, and the organist, a man who had music in his soul. Low as she was singing, he caught the sound of Stella's voice, and knew at once that before him was a woman who in a supreme degree possessed the divinest gift, perhaps, with which Nature can crown her sex, the power and gift of song. Forgetting his wretched choir, he began to play to her. She seemed to note the invitation, and at once answered to it.

"Look, Father, look on His anointed face,"

swelled from her throat in deep contralto notes, rich as those the organ echoed.

But the full glory of the thing, that surpassing music which set Monksland talking for a week, was not reached till she came to the third verse. Perhaps the pure passion and abounding humanity of its spirit moved her. Perhaps by this time she was the thrall of her own song. Perhaps she had caught the look of wonder and admiration on the face of Morris, and was determined to show him that she had other music at command besides that of pagan death-chants. At least, she sang up and out, till her notes dominated those of the choir, which seemed to be but an accompaniment to them; till they beat against the ancient roof and down the depth of the long nave, to be echoed back as though from the golden trumpets of the angels that stood above the tower screen; till even the village children ceased from whispers and playing to listen open-mouthed.

"And then for those, our dearest and best,
By this prevailing Presence we appeal;
O! fold them closer to Thy mercy's breast,
O! do Thine utmost, for their souls' true weal;
From tainting mischief keep them white and clear,
And crown Thy gifts with strength to persevere."

It was as her voice lingered upon the deep tones of these last words that suddenly Stella seemed to become aware that practically she was singing a solo; that at any rate no one else in the congregation was contributing a note. Then she was vexed, or perhaps a panic took her; at least, not another word of that hymn passed her lips. In vain the

organist paused and looked round indignantly; the little boys, the clerk, and the stout coach-builder were left to finish it by themselves, with results that by contrast were painful.

When Stella came out of church, redraped in the antique and unbecoming fichu, she found herself the object of considerable attention. Indeed, upon one pretext and another nearly all the congregation seemed to be lingering about the porch and pathway to stare at the new parson's shipwrecked daughter when she appeared. Among them was Miss Layard, and with her the delicate brother. They were staying to lunch with the Stop-gap's meek little wife. Indeed, this self-satisfied and somewhat acrimonious lady, Miss Layard, engaged Morris in conversation, and pointedly asked him to introduce her to Miss Fregelius.

"We are to be neighbours, you know," she explained, "for we live at the Hall in the next parish, not more than a mile away."

"Indeed," answered Stella, who did not seem much impressed.

"My brother and I hope to call upon Mr. Fregelius and yourself as soon as possible, but I thought I would not wait for that to have the pleasure of making your acquaintance."

"You are very kind indeed," said Stella simply. "At present, I am afraid, it is not much use calling upon my father, as he is in bed with a broken thigh; also, we are not at the Rectory. Until he can be moved

we are only guests at the Abbey," and she looked at Morris, who added rather grumpily, by way of explanation:

"Of course, Miss Layard, you have heard about the wreck of the Trondhjem, and how those foreign sailors saw the light in my workshop and brought Mr. Fregelius to the Abbey."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Monk, and how they left Miss Fregelius behind, and you went to fetch her, and all sorts of strange things happened to you. We think it quite wonderful and romantic. I am writing to dear Miss Porson to tell her about it, because I am sure that you are too modest to sing your own praises."

Morris grew angry. At the best of times he disliked Miss Layard. Now he began to detest her, and to long for the presence of Mary, who understood how to deal with that not too well-bred young person.

"You really needn't have troubled," he answered. "I have already written."

"Then my epistle will prove a useful commentary. If I were engaged to a modern hero I am sure I could not hear too much about him, and," fixing her eyes upon the black silk fichu, "the heroine of the adventure."

Meanwhile, Stella was being engaged by the brother, who surveyed her with pale, admiring eyes which did not confine their attentions to the

fichu.

"Monk is always an awfully lucky fellow," he said. "Just fancy his getting the chance of doing all that, and finding you waiting on the ship at the end of it," he added, with desperate and emphatic gallantry. "There's to be a whole column about it in the 'Northwold Times' to-morrow. I wish the thing had come my way, that's all."

"Unless you understand how to manage a boat in a heavy sea, and the winds and tides of this coast thoroughly, I don't think that you should wish that, Mr. Layard," said Stella.

"Why not?" he asked sharply. As a matter of fact the little man was a miserable sailor and suspected her of poking fun at him.

"Because you would have been drowned, Mr. Layard, and lying at the bottom of the North Sea among the dogfish and conger-eels this morning instead of sitting comfortably in church."

Mr. Layard started and stared at her. Evidently this lady's imagination was as vivid as it was suggestive.

"I say, Miss Fregelius," he said, "you don't put things very pleasantly."

"No, I am afraid not, but then drowning isn't pleasant. I have been near

it very lately, and I thought a great deal about those conger-eels. And sudden death isn't pleasant, and perhaps--unless you are very, very good, as I daresay you are--what comes after it may not be quite pleasant. All of which has to be thought of before one goes to sea in an open boat in winter, on the remotest chance of saving a stranger's life--hasn't it?"

Somehow Mr. Layard felt distinctly smaller.

"I daresay one wouldn't mind it at a pinch," he muttered; "Monk isn't the only plucky fellow in the world."

"I am sure you would not, Mr. Layard," replied Stella in a gentler voice, "still these things must be considered upon such occasions and a good many others."

"A brave man doesn't think, he acts," persisted Mr. Layard.

"No," replied Stella, "a foolish man doesn't think, a brave man thinks and sees, and still acts--at least, that is how it strikes me, although perhaps I have no right to an opinion. But Mr. Monk is going on, so I must say good-morning."

"Are many of the ladies about here so inquisitive, and the young gentlemen so?"--"decided" she was going to say, but changed the word to "kind"--asked Stella of Morris as they walked homeward.

"Ladies!" snapped Morris. "Miss Layard isn't a lady, and never will be; she has neither birth nor breeding, only good looks of a sort and money. I should like," he added, viciously--"I should like to shut her into her own coal mine."

Stella laughed, which was a rare thing with her--usually she only smiled--as she answered:

"I had no idea you were so vindictive, Mr. Monk. And what would you like to do with Mr. Layard?"

"Oh! I--never thought much about him. He is an ignorant, uneducated little fellow, but worth two of his sister, all the same. After all, he's got a heart. I have known him do kind things, but she has nothing but a temper."

Meanwhile, at the luncheon table of the Stop-gap the new and mysterious arrival, Miss Fregelius, was the subject of fierce debate.

"Pretty! I don't call her pretty," said Miss Layard; "she has fine eyes, that is all, and they do not look quite right. What an extraordinary garment she had on, too; it might have come out of Noah's Ark."

"I fancy," suggested the hostess, a mild little woman, "that it came out of the wardrobe of the late Mrs. Monk. You know, Miss Fregelius lost all

her things in that ship."

"Then if I were she I should have stopped at home until I got some new ones," snapped Miss Layard.

"Perhaps everybody doesn't think so much about clothes as you do, Eliza," suggested her brother Stephen, seeing an opportunity which he was loth to lose. Eliza, in the privacy of domestic life, was not a person to be assailed with a light heart, but in company, when to some extent she must keep her temper under control, more might be dared.

She shifted her chair a little, with her a familiar sign of war, and while searching for a repartee which would be sufficiently crushing, cast on Stephen a glance that might have turned wine into vinegar.

Somewhat tremulously, for unless the fire could be damped before it got full hold, she knew what they might expect, the little hostess broke in with--

"What a beautiful singing voice she has, hasn't she?"

"Who?" asked Eliza, pretending not to understand.

"Why, Miss Fregelius, of course."

"Oh, well, that is a matter of opinion."

"Hang it all, Eliza!" said her brother, "there can't be two opinions about it, she sings like an angel."

"Do you think so, Stephen? I should have said she sings like an opera dancer."

"Always understood that their gifts lay in their legs and not in their throats. But perhaps you mean a prima donna," remarked Stephen reflectively.

"No, I don't. Prima donnas are not in the habit of screeching at the top of their voices, and then stopping suddenly to make an effect and attract attention."

"Certainly she has attracted my attention, and I only wish I could hear such screeching every day; it would be a great change." It may be explained that the Layards were musical, and that each detested the music of the other.

"Really, Stephen," rejoined Eliza, with sarcasm as awkward as it was meant to be crushing, "I shall have to tell Jane Rose that she is dethroned, poor dear--beaten out of the field by a hymn-tune, a pair of brown eyes, and--a black silk fichu."

This was a venomous stab, since for a distance of ten miles round

everyone with ears to hear knew that Stephen's admiration of Miss Rose had not ended prosperously for Stephen. The poisoned knife sank deep, and its smart drove the little pale-eyed man to fury.

"You can tell her what you like, Eliza," he replied, for his self-control was utterly gone; "but it won't be much use, for she'll know what you mean. She'll know that you are jealous of Miss Fregelius because she's so good looking; just as you are jealous of her, and of Mary Porson, and of anybody else who dares to be pretty and," with crushing meaning, "to look at Morris Monk."

Eliza gasped, then said in a tragic whisper, "Stephen, you insult me. Oh! if only we were at home, I would tell you----"

"I have no doubt you would--you often do; but I'm not going home at present. I am going to the Northwold hotel."

"Really," broke in their hostess, almost wringing her hands, "this is Sunday, Mr. Layard; remember this is Sunday."

"I am not likely to forget it," replied the maddened Stephen; but over the rest of this edifying scene we will drop a veil.

Thus did the advent of Stella bring with it surprises, rumours, and family dissensions. What else it brought remains to be told.