CHAPTER XII

MR. LAYARD'S WOOING

The days went by with an uneventful swiftness at the Abbey, and after he had once accustomed himself to the strangeness of what was, in effect, solitude in the house with an unmarried guest of the other sex, it may be admitted, very pleasantly to Morris. At first that rather remarkable young lady, Stella, had alarmed him somewhat, so that he convinced himself that the duties of this novel hospitality would prove irksome. As a matter of fact, however, in forty-eight hours the irksomeness was all gone, to be replaced within twice that period by an atmosphere of complete understanding, which was comforting to his fearful soul.

The young lady was never in the way. Now that she had procured some suitable clothes the young lady was distinctly good looking; she was remarkably intelligent and well-read; she sang, as Stephen Layard had said, "like an angel"; she took a most enlightened interest in aerophones and their possibilities; she proved a very useful assistant in various experiments; and made one or two valuable suggestions. While Mary and the rest of them were away the place would really be dull without her, and somehow he could not be as sorry as he ought when Dr. Charters told him that old Mr. Fregelius's bones were uniting with exceeding slowness.

Such were the conclusions which one by one took shape in the mind of

that ill-starred man, Morris Monk. As yet, however, let the student of his history understand, they were not tinged with the slightest "arriere-pensee." He did not guess even that such relations as already existed between Stella and himself might lead to grievous trouble; that at least they were scarcely wise in the case of a man engaged.

All he felt, all he knew, was that he had found a charming companion, a woman whose thought, if deeper, or at any rate different to his and not altogether to be followed, was in tune with his. He could not always catch her meaning, and yet that unrealised meaning would appeal to him. Himself a very spiritual man, and a humble seeker after truth, his nature did intuitive reverence to one who appeared to be still more spiritual, who, as he conjectured, at times at any rate, had discovered some portion of the truth. He believed it, although she had never told him so. Indeed that semi-mystical side of Stella, whereof at first she had shown him glimpses, seemed to be quite in abeyance; she dreamed no more dreams, she saw no more visions, or if she did she kept them to herself. Yet to him this woman seemed to be in touch with that unseen which he found it so difficult to weigh and appreciate. Instinctively he felt that her best thoughts, her most noble and permanent desires, were there and not here.

As he had said to her in the boat, the old Egyptians lived to die. In life a clay hut was for them a sufficient lodging; in death they sought a costly, sculptured tomb, hewn from the living rock. With them these things were symbolical, since that great people believed, with a

wonderful certainty, that the true life lay beyond. They believed, too, that on the earth they did but linger in its gateway, passing their time with such joy as they could summon, baring their heads undismayed to the rain of sorrow, because they knew that very soon they would be crowned with eternal joys, whereof each of these sorrows was but an earthly root.

Stella Fregelius reminded Morris of these old Egyptians. Indeed, had he wished to carry the comparison from her spiritual to her physical attributes it still might have been considered apt, for in face she was somewhat Eastern. Let the reader examine the portrait bust of the great Queen Taia, clothed with its mysterious smile, which adorns the museum in Cairo, and, given fair instead of dusky skin, with certain other minor differences, he will behold no mean likeness to Stella Fregelius. However this may be, for if Morris saw the resemblance there were others who could not agree with him; doubtless although not an Eastern, ancient or modern, she was tinged with the fatalism of the East, mingled with a certain contempt of death inherited perhaps from her northern ancestors, and an active, pervading spirituality that was all her own. Yet her manners were not gloomy, nor her air tragic, for he found her an excellent companion, fond of children and flowers, and at times merry in her own fashion. But this gaiety of hers always reminded Morris of that which is said to have prevailed in the days of the Terror among those destined to the guillotine. Never for one hour did she seem to forget the end. "'Vanity of vanities,' saith the Preacher"; and that lesson was her watchword.

One evening they were walking together upon the cliff. In the west the sun had sunk, leaving a pale, lemon-coloured glow upon the sky. Then far away over the quiet sea, showing bright and large in that frosty air, sprang out a single star. Stella halted in her walk, and looked first at the sunset heaven, next at the solemn sea, and last at that bright, particular star set like a diadem of power upon the brow of advancing night. Morris, watching her, saw the blood mantle to her pale face, while the dark eyes grew large and luminous, proud, too, and full of secret strength. At length his curiosity got the better of him.

"What are you thinking of?" he asked.

"Do you wish me to tell you?"

"Yes, if you will."

"You will laugh at me."

"Yes--as I laugh at that sky, and sea, and star."

"Well, then, I was thinking of the old, eternal difference between the present and the future."

"You mean between life and death?" queried Morris, and she nodded, answering:

"Between life and death, and how little people see or think of it. They just live and forget that beneath them lie their fathers' bones. They forget that in some few days--perhaps more, perhaps less--other unknown creatures will be standing above their forgotten bones, as blind, as self-seeking, as puffed up with the pride of the brief moment, and filled with the despair of their failure, the glory of their success, as they are to-night."

"Perhaps," suggested Morris, "they say that while they are in the world it is well to be of the world; that when they belong to the next it will be time to consider it. I am not sure that they are not right. I have heard that view," he added, remembering a certain conversation with Mary.

"Oh, don't think that!" she answered, almost imploringly; "for it is not true, really it is not true. Of course, the next world belongs to all, but our lot in it does not come to us by right, that must be earned."

"The old doctrine of our Faith," suggested Morris.

"Yes; but, as I believe, there is more behind, more which we are not told; that we must find out for ourselves with 'groanings which cannot be uttered; by hope we are saved.' Did not St. Paul hint at it?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that as our spirit sows, so shall it reap; as it imagines and desires, so shall it inherit. It is here that the soul must grow, not there. As the child comes into the world with a nature already formed, and its blood filled with gifts of strength or weakness, so shall the spirit come into its world wearing the garment that it has woven and which it cannot change."

"The garment which it has woven," said Morris. "That means free will, and how does free will chime in with your fatalism, Miss Fregelius?"

"Perfectly; the material given us to weave with, that is Fate; the time which is allotted for the task, that is Fate again; but the pattern is our own. Here are brushes, here is pigment, so much of it, of such and such colours, and here is light to work by. 'Now paint your picture,' says the Master; 'paint swiftly, with such skill as you can, not knowing how long is allotted for the task.' And so we weave, and so we paint, every one of us--every one of us."

"What is your picture, Miss Fregelius? Tell me, if you will."

She laughed, and drew herself up. "Mine, oh! it is large. It is to reign like that star. It is to labour forward from age to age at the great tasks that God shall set me; to return and bow before His throne crying, 'It is done. Behold, is the work good?' For the hour that they endure it is still to be with those whom I have loved on earth, although they

cannot see me; to soothe their sorrows, to support their weakness, to lull their fears. It is that the empty longing and daily prayer may be filled, and filled, and filled again, like a cup from a stream which never ceases."

"And what is that daily prayer?" asked Morris, looking at her.

"O! God, touch me with Thy light, and give me understanding--yes, understanding--the word encloses all I seek," she replied, then, checking herself, added in a changed voice, "Come, let us go home; it is foolish to talk long of such things."

Shortly after this curious conversation, which was never renewed between them, or, at least, but once, a new element entered into the drama, the necessary semi-comic element without which everything would be so dull. This fresh factor was the infatuation, which possibly the reader may have foreseen, of the susceptible, impulsive little man, Stephen Layard, for Stella Fregelius, the lady whose singing he had admired, and who had been a cause of war between him and his sister. Like many weak men, Stephen Layard was obstinate, also from boyhood up he had suffered much at the hands of Eliza, who was not, in fact, quite so young as she looked. Hence there arose in his breast a very natural desire for retaliation. Eliza had taken a violent dislike to Miss Fregelius, whom he thought charming. This circumstance in their strained relations was

reason enough to induce Stephen to pay court to her, even if his natural inclination had not made the adventure very congenial.

Therefore, on the first opportunity he called at the Abbey to ask after the rector, to be, as he had hoped, received by Stella. Finding his visit exceedingly agreeable, after a day or two he repeated it, and this time was conducted to the old clergyman's bedroom, upon whom his civility made a good impression.

Now, as it happened, although he did not live in Monksland, Mr. Layard was one of the largest property owners in the parish, a circumstance which he did not fail to impress upon the new rector. Being by nature and training a hard-working man who wished to do his best for his cure even while he lay helpless, Mr. Fregelius welcomed the advances of this wealthy young gentleman with enthusiasm, especially when he found that he was no niggard. A piece of land was wanted for the cemetery. Mr. Layard offered to present an acre. Money was lacking to pay off a debt upon the reading-room. Mr. Layard headed the subscription list with a handsome sum. And so forth.

Now the details of these various arrangements could not conveniently be settled without many interviews, and thus very soon it came about that scarcely a day went by upon which Mr. Layard's dog-cart did not pass through the Abbey gates. Generally he came in the morning and stopped to lunch; or he came in the afternoon and stopped to tea. In fact, or thus it seemed to Morris, he always stopped to something, so much so that

although not lacking in hospitality, at times Morris found his presence wearisome, for in truth the two men had nothing in common.

"He must have turned over a new leaf with a vengeance, for he never would give a sixpence to anything during old Tomley's time," remarked Morris to Stella. "I suppose that he has taken a great fancy to your father, which is a good thing for the parish, as those Layards are richer than Croesus."

"Yes," answered Stella with a curious little smile.

But to herself she did not smile; for, if Morris found his visitor a bore, to Stella he was nothing short of an infliction, increased rather than mitigated by numerous presents of hot-house fruit and flowers offered to herself, and entailing, each of them, an expression of thanks verbal or written. At first she treated the thing as a joke, till it grew evident that her admirer was as much in earnest as his nature would permit. Thereon, foreseeing eventualities, she became alarmed.

Unless some means could be found to stop him it was now clear to Stella that Mr. Layard meant to propose to her, and as she had not the slightest intention of accepting him this was an honour which she did not seek. But she could find no sufficient means; hints, and even snubs, only seemed to add fuel to the fire, and of a perpetual game of hide and seek she grew weary.

So it came about that at last she shrugged her shoulders and left things to take their chance, finding some consolation for her discomfort in the knowledge that Miss Layard, convinced that the rector's daughter was luring her inexperienced brother into an evil matrimonial net, could in no wise restrain her rage and indignation. So openly did this lady express her views, indeed, that at length a report of them reached even Morris's inattentive ears, whereon he was at first very angry and then burst out laughing. That a man like Stephen Layard should hope to marry a woman like Stella Fregelius seemed to him so absurd as to be almost unnatural. Yet when he came to think it over quietly he was constrained to admit to himself that the match would have many advantages for the young lady, whereof the first and foremost were that Stephen was very rich, and although slangy and without education in its better sense, at heart by no means a bad little fellow. So Morris shrugged his shoulders, shut his eyes, continued to dispense luncheons and afternoon teas, and though with an uneasy mind, like Stella herself, allowed things to take their chance.

All this while, however, his own friendship with Stella grew apace, enhanced as it was in no small degree by the fact that now her help in his scientific operations had become most valuable. Indeed, it appeared that he was destined to owe the final success of his instrument to the assistance of women who, at the beginning, at any rate, knew little of its principles. Mary, it may be remembered, by some fortunate chance, made the suggestion as to the substance of the receiver, which turned the aerophone from a great idea into a practical reality. Now to

complete the work it was Stella, not by accident, but after careful study of its problem who gave the thought that led to the removal of the one remaining obstacle to its general and successful establishment.

To test this new development of the famous sound deflector and perfect its details, scores of experiments were needed, most of which he and she carried out together. This was their plan. One of them established him or herself in the ruined building known as the Dead Church, while the other took up a position in the Abbey workshop. From these respective points, a distance of about two miles, they tested the machines with results that day by day grew better and clearer, till at length, under these conditions they were almost perfect.

Strange was the experience and great the triumph when at last Morris, seated in the Abbey with his apparatus before him, unconnected with its twin by any visible medium, was able without interruption for a whole morning to converse with Stella established in the Dead Church.

"It is done," he cried in unusual exultation. "Now, if I die to-morrow it does not matter."

Instantly came the answer in Stella's voice.

"I am very happy. If I do nothing else I have helped a man to fame."

Then a hitch arose, the inevitable hitch; it was found that, in certain

states of the atmosphere, and sometimes at fixed hours of the day, the sounds coming from the receiver were almost inaudible. At other times again the motive force seemed to be so extraordinarily active that, the sound deflector notwithstanding, the instrument captured and transmitted a thousand noises which are not to be heard by the unobservant listener, or in some cases by any human ear.

Weird enough these noises were at times. Like great sighs they came, like the moan of the breeze brought from an infinite distance, like mutterings and groanings arisen from the very bowels of the earth. Then there were the splash or boom of the waves, the piping of the sea-wind, the cry of curlew, or black-backed gulls, all mingled in one great and tangled skein of sound that choked the voice of the speaker, and in their aggregate, bewildered him who hearkened.

These, and others which need not be detailed, were problems that had to be met, necessitating many more experiments. Thus it came about that through most of the short hours of winter daylight Morris and Stella found themselves at their respective positions, corresponding, or trying to correspond, through the aerophones. If the weather was very bad, or very cold, Morris went to the dead Church, otherwise that post was allotted to Stella, both because it was more convenient that Morris should stay in his laboratory, and by her own choice.

Two principal reasons caused her to prefer to pass as much of her time as was possible in this desolate and unvisited spot. First, because Mr.

Layard was less likely to find her when he called, and secondly, that for her it had a strange fascination. Indeed, she loved the place, clothed as it was with a thousand memories of those who had been human like herself, but now--were not. She would read the inscriptions upon the chancel stones and study the coats-of-arms and names of those departed, trying to give to each lost man and woman a shape and character, till at length she knew all the monuments by appearance as well as by the names inscribed upon them.

One of these dead, oddly enough, had been named Stella Ethel Smythe, daughter of Sir Thomas Smythe, whose family lived at the old hall now in the possession of the Layards. This Stella had died at the age of twenty-five in the year 1741, and her tombstone recorded that in mind she was clean and sweet, and in body beautiful. Also at the foot of it was a doggerel couplet, written probably by her bereaved father, which ran:

"Though here my Star seems set,
I know 'twill light me yet."

Stella, the live Stella, thought these simple words very touching, and pointed them out to Morris. He agreed with her, and tried in the records of the parish and elsewhere to discover some details about the dead girl's life, but quite without avail.

"That's all that's left," he said one day, nodding his head at the

tombstone. "The star is quite set."

"'I know 'twill light me yet,'" murmured his companion, as she turned away to the work in hand. "Sometimes," she went on, "as I sit here at dusk listening to all the strange sounds which come from that receiver, I fancy that I can hear Stella and her poor father talking while they watch me; only I cannot understand their language."

"Ah!" said Morris, "if that were right we should have found a means of communication from the dead and with the unseen world at large."

"Why not?" asked Stella.

"I don't know, I have thought of it," he answered, and the subject dropped.

One afternoon Stella, wrapped in thick cloaks, was seated in the chancel of the Dead Church attending to the instrument which stood upon the stone altar. Morris had not wished her to go that morning, for the weather was very coarse, and snow threatened; but, anticipating a visit from Mr. Layard, she insisted, saying that she should enjoy the walk. Now the experiments were in progress, and going beautifully. In order to test the aerophones fully in this rough weather, Morris and Stella had agreed to read to each other alternate verses from the Book of Job, beginning at the thirty-eighth chapter.

"'Canst thou bind the sweet influences of Pleiades, or loose the bands of Orion?'" read Stella presently in her rich, clear voice.

Instantly from two miles away came the next verse, the sound of those splendid words rolling down the old church like echoes of some lesson read generations since.

"'Canst thou bring forth Mazzaroth in his season, or canst thou guide Arcturus with his sons?'"

So it went on for a few more verses, till just as the instrument was saying, "'Who hath put wisdom in the inward parts, or who hath given understanding to the heart?'" the rude door in the brick partition opened, admitting a rush of wind and--Stephen Layard.

The little man sidled up nervously to where Stella was sitting on a camp-stool by the altar.

"How do you do?" said Stella, holding out her hand, and looking surprised.

"How do you do, Miss Fregelius? What--what are you doing in this dreadfully cold place on such a bitter day?"

Before she could answer the voice of Morris, anxious and irritated, for as the next verse did not follow he concluded that something had gone

wrong with the apparatus, rang through the church asking:

"'Who hath put wisdom in the inward parts, or who hath given understanding to the heart?'"

"Good gracious," said Mr. Layard. "I had no idea that Monk was here; I left him at the Abbey. Where is he?"

"At the Abbey," answered Stella, as for the second time the voice of Morris rolled out the question from the Book.

"I don't understand," said Stephen, beginning to look frightened; "has it anything to do with his electrical experiments?"

Stella nodded. Then, addressing the instrument, said:

"Please stop reading for a while. Mr. Layard is calling here."

"Confound him," came the swift answer. "Let me know when he is gone. He said he was going home," whereon Stella switched off before worse things happened.

Mr. Layard, who had heard these words, began a confused explanation till Stella broke in.

"Please don't apologise. You changed your mind, and we all do that; but

I am afraid this is a cold place to come to."

"You are right there. Why on earth do you sit here so long?"

"To work, Mr. Layard."

"Why should you work? I thought women hated it, and above all, why for Monk? Does he pay you?"

"I work because I like work, and shall go on working till I die, and afterwards I hope; also, these experiments interest me very much. Mr. Monk does not pay me. I have never asked him to do so. Indeed, it is I who am in his debt for all the kindness he has shown to my father and myself. To any little assistance that I can give him he is welcome."

"I see," said Mr. Layard; "but I should have thought that was Mary Porson's job. You know he is engaged to her, don't you?"

"Yes, but Miss Porson is not here; and if she were, perhaps she would not care for this particular work."

Then came a pause, which, not knowing what this awkward silence might breed, Stella broke.

"I suppose you saw my father," she said; "how did you find him looking?"

"Oh! better, I thought; but that leg of his still seems very bad." Then, with a gasp and a great effort, he went on: "I have been speaking to him about you."

"Indeed," said Stella, looking at him with wondering eyes.

"Yes, and he says that if--it suits us both, he is quite willing; that, in fact, he would be very pleased to see you so well provided for."

Stella could not say that she did not understand, the falsehood was too obvious. So she merely went on looking, a circumstance from which Mr. Layard drew false auguries.

"You know what I mean, don't you?" he jerked out.

She shook her head.

"I mean--I mean that I love you, that you have given me what this horrid thing was talking about just now--understanding to the heart; yes, that's it, understanding to the heart. Will you marry me, Stella? I will make you a good husband, and it isn't a bad place, and all that, and though your father says he has little to leave you, you will be treated as liberally as though you were a lady in your own right."

Stella smiled a little.

"Will you marry me?" he asked again.

"I am afraid that I must answer no, Mr. Layard."

Then the poor man broke out into a rhapsody of bitter disappointment, genuine emotion, and passionate entreaty.

"It is no use, Mr. Layard," said Stella at last. "Indeed, I am much obliged to you. You have paid me a great compliment, but it is not possible that I should become your wife, and the sooner that is clear the better for us both."

"Are you engaged?" he asked.

"No, Mr. Layard; and probably I never shall be. I have my own ideas about matrimony, and the conditions under which I would undertake it are not at all likely ever to be within my reach."

Again he implored,--for at the time this woman really held his heart,--wringing his hands, and, indeed, weeping in the agony of a repulse which was the more dreadful because it was quite unexpected. He had scarcely imagined that this poor clergyman's daughter, who had little but her looks and a sweet voice, would really refuse the best match for twenty miles round, nor had his conversation with her father suggested to his mind any such idea.

It was true that Mr. Fregelius had given him no absolute encouragement; he had said that personally the marriage would be very pleasing to himself, but that it was a matter of which Stella must judge; and when asked whether he would speak to his daughter, he had emphatically declined. Still, Stephen Layard had taken this to be all a part of the paternal formula, and rejoiced, thinking the matter as good as settled. Dreadful indeed, then, was it to him when he found that he was called upon to contemplate the dull obverse of his shield of faith, and not its bright and shining face, in which he had seen mirrored so clear a picture of perfect happiness.

So he begged on piteously enough, till at last Stella was forced to stop him by saying as gently as she could:

"Please spare us both, Mr. Layard; I have given my answer, and I am sorry to say that it is impossible for me to go back upon my word."

Then a sudden fury seized him.

"You are in love with somebody else," he said; "you are in love with Morris Monk; and he is a villain, when he is engaged, to go taking you too. I know it."

"Then, Mr. Layard," said Stella, striving to keep her temper, "you know more than I know myself."

"Very likely," he answered. "I never said you knew it, but it's true, for all that. I feel it here--where you will feel it one day, to your sorrow"--and he placed his hand upon his heart.

A sudden terror took hold of her, but with difficulty she found her mental balance.

"I hoped, Mr. Layard," she said, "that we might have parted friends; but how can we when you bring such accusations?"

"I retract them," broke in the distracted man. "You mustn't think anything of what I said; it is only the pain that has made me mad. For God's sake, at least let us part friends, for then, perhaps, some day we may come together again."

Stella shook her head sadly, and gave him her hand, which he covered with kisses. Then, reeling in his gait like one drunken, the unhappy suitor departed into the falling snow.

Mechanically Stella switched on the instrument, and at once Morris's voice was heard asking:

"I say, hasn't he gone?"

"Yes," she said.

"Thank goodness! Why on earth did you keep him gossiping all that time? Now then--'Who can number the clouds in wisdom----'"

"Not Mr. Layard or I," thought Stella sadly to herself, as she called back the answering verse.