CHAPTER XIV

THE RETURN OF THE COLONEL

Next morning Morris and Stella met at breakfast as usual, but as though by mutual consent neither of them alluded to the events of the previous evening. Thus the name of Mr. Layard was "taboo," nor were any more questions asked, or statements volunteered as to that journey, the toils of which Morris had suddenly discovered he was after all able to avoid. This morning, as it chanced, no experiments were carried on, principally because it was necessary for Stella to spend the day in the village doing various things on behalf of her father, and lunching with the wife of Dr. Charters, who was one of the churchwardens.

By the second post, which arrived about three o'clock, Morris received two letters, one from his father and one from Mary. There was something about the aspect of these letters that held his eye. That from his father was addressed with unusual neatness, the bold letters being written with all the care of a candidate in a calligraphic competition. The stamps also were affixed very evenly, and the envelope was beautifully sealed with the full Monk coat done in black wax. These, as experience told him, were signs that his father had something important to communicate, since otherwise everything connected with his letters was much more casual. Further, to speak at hazard, he should judge that this matter, whatever it might be, was not altogether disagreeable to the writer.

Mary's letter also had its peculiarities. She always wrote in a large, loose scrawl, running the words into one another after the idle fashion which was an index to her character. In this instance, however, the fault had been carried to such an extreme that the address was almost illegible; indeed, Morris wondered that the letter had not been delayed. The stamps, too, were affixed anyhow, and the envelope barely closed.

"Something has happened," he thought to himself. Then he opened Mary's letter. It was dated Tuesday, that is, two days before, and ran:

"Dearest,--My father is dead, my poor old father, and now I have nobody but you left in the world. Thank God, at the last he was without pain and, they thought, insensible; but I know he wasn't, because he squeezed my hand. Some of his last words that could be understood were, 'Give my love to Morris.' Oh! I feel as though my heart would break. After my mother's death till you came into my life, he was everything to me--everything, everything. I can't write any more.

"Your loving "Mary."

"P.S. Don't trouble to come out here. It is no good. He is to be buried to-morrow, and next day I am going 'en retraite' for a month, as I must have time to get over this--to accustom myself to not seeing him every morning when I come down to breakfast. You remember my French friend,

Gabrielle d'Estree? Well; she is a nun now, a sub-something or other in a convent near here where they take in people for a payment. Somehow she heard my father was dead, and came to see me, and offered to put me up at the convent, which has a beautiful large garden, for I have been there. So I said yes, for I shan't feel lonely with her, and it will be a rest for a month. I shall write to you sometimes, and you needn't be afraid, they won't make me a Roman Catholic. Your father objected at first, but now he quite approves; indeed, I told him at last that I meant to go whether he approved or not. It seems it doesn't matter from a business point of view, as you and he are left executors of my father's will. When the month is up I will come to England, and we will settle about getting married. This is the address of the convent as nearly as I can remember it. Letters will reach me there."

Morris laid down the sheet with a sad heart, for he had been truly attached to his uncle Porson, whose simple virtues he understood and appreciated. Then he opened his father's letter, which began in an imposing manner:

"My Dear Son (usually he called him Morris),--It is with the deepest grief that I must tell you that poor John Porson, your uncle, passed away this morning about ten o'clock. I was present at the time, and did my best to soothe his last moments with such consolations as can be offered by a relative who is not a clergyman. I wished to wire the sad

event to you, but Mary, in whom natural grief develops a self-will that perhaps is also natural, peremptorily refused to allow it, alleging that it was useless to alarm you and waste money on telegrams (how like a woman to think of money at such a moment) when it was quite impossible that you could arrive here in time for the funeral (for he wouldn't be brought home), which, under these queer foreign regulations, must take place to-morrow. Also she announced, to my surprise, and, I must admit, somewhat to my pain, that she intended to immure herself for a month in a convent, after the fashion of the Roman faith, so that it was no use your coming, as men are not admitted into these places. It never seems to have occurred to her that under this blow I should have liked the consolation of her presence, or that I might wish to see you, my son. Still, you must not think too much of all this, although I have felt bound to bring it to your notice, since women under such circumstances are naturally emotional, rebellious against the decrees of Providence, and consequently somewhat selfish.

"To turn to another subject. I am glad to be able to inform you--you will please accept this as an official notice of the fact--that on reading a copy of your uncle's will, which by his directions was handed to me after his death, I find that he has died much better off even than I expected. The net personalty will amount to quite 100,000 pounds, and there is large realty, of which at present I do not know the value. All this is left to Mary with the fullest possible powers of disposal. You and I are appointed executors with a complimentary legacy of 500 pounds to you, and but 100 pounds to me. However, the testator 'in

consideration of the forthcoming marriage between his son Morris and my daughter Mary, remits all debts and obligations that may be due to his estate by the said Richard Monk, Lieutenant-Colonel, Companion of the Bath, and an executor of this will.' This amounts to something, of course, but I will not trouble you with details at the moment.

"After all, now that I come to think of it, it is as well that you should not leave home at present, as there will be plenty of executor's business to keep you on the spot. No doubt you will hear from your late uncle's lawyers, Thomas and Thomas, and as soon as you do so you had better go over to Seaview and take formal possession of it and its contents as an executor of the will. I have no time to write more at present, as the undertaker is waiting to see me about the last arrangements for the interment, which takes place at the English cemetery here. The poor man has gone, but at least we may reflect that he can be no more troubled by sickness, etc., and it is a consolation to know that he has made arrangements so eminently proper under the circumstances.

"Your affectionate father,

"Richard Monk.

"P.S. I shall remain here for a little while so as to be near Mary in case she wishes to see me, and afterwards work homewards via Paris. I expect to turn up at the Abbey in a fortnight's time or so."

"Quite in his best style," reflected Morris to himself. "'Remits all debts and obligations that may be due to his estate by the said Richard Monk.' I should be surprised if they don't amount to a good lot. No wonder my father is going to return via Paris; he must feel quite rich again."

Then he sat down to write to Mary.

Under the pressure of this sudden blow--for the fact that Mr. Porson had been for some time in failing health, and the knowledge that his life might terminate at any time, did not seem to make it less sudden--a cloud of depression settled on the Abbey household. Before dinner Morris visited Mr. Fregelius, and told him of what had happened; whereon that pious and kindly, but somewhat inefficient man, bestowed upon him a well-meant lecture of consolation. Appreciating his motives, Morris thanked him sincerely, and was rising to depart, when the clergyman added:

"It is most grievous to me, Mr. Monk, that in these sad hours of mourning you should be forced to occupy your mind with the details of an hospitality which has been forced upon you by circumstances. For the present I fear this cannot be altered----"

"I do not wish it altered," interrupted Morris.

"It is indeed kind of you to say so, but I am happy to state the doctor tells me if I continue to progress as well as at present, I shall be able to leave your roof----"

"My father's roof," broke in Morris again.

"I beg pardon--your father's roof--in about a fortnight."

"I am sorry to hear it, sir; and please clear your mind of the idea that you have ceased to be welcome. Your presence and that of Miss Fregelius will lessen, not increase, my trouble. I should be lonely in this great place with no company but that of my own thoughts."

"I am glad to hear you say so. Whether you feel it or not you are kind, very kind."

And so for the while they parted. When she came in that afternoon, Mr. Fregelius told Stella the news; but, as it happened, she did not see Morris until she met him at dinner time.

"You have heard?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," she answered; "and I am sorry, so sorry. I do not know what more to say."

"There is nothing to be said," answered Morris; "my poor uncle had lived out his life--he was sixty-eight, you know, and there is an end."

"Were you fond of him? Forgive me for asking, but people are not always fond--really fond--of those who happen to be their relations."

"Yes, I was very fond of him. He was a good man, though simple and self-made; very kind to everybody; especially to myself."

"Then do not grieve for him, his pains are over, and some day you will meet him again, will you not?"

"I suppose so; but in the presence of death faith falters."

"I know; but I think that is when it should be strongest and clearest, that is when we should feel that whatever else is unreal and false, this is certain and true."

Morris bowed his head in assent, and there was silence for a while.

"I am afraid that Miss Porson must feel this very much," Stella said presently.

"Yes, she seems quite crushed. She was his only living child, you know."

"Are you not going to join her?"

"No, I cannot; she has gone into a convent for a month, near Beaulieu, and I am afraid the Sisters would not let me through their gates."

"Is she a Catholic?"

"Not at all, but an old friend of hers holds some high position in the place, and she has taken a fancy to be quiet there for a while."

"It is very natural," answered Stella, and nothing more was said upon the subject.

Stella neither played the violin nor sang that night, nor, indeed, again while she remained alone with Morris at the Abbey. Both of them felt that under the circumstances this form of pleasure would be out of place, if not unfeeling, and it was never suggested. For the rest, however, their life went on as usual. On two or three occasions when the weather was suitable some further experiments were carried out with the aerophone, but on most days Stella was engaged in preparing the Rectory, a square, red-brick house, dating from the time of George III., to receive them as soon as her father could be moved. Very fortunately, as has been said, their journey in the steamer Trondhjem had been decided upon so hurriedly that there was no time to allow them to ship their heavy baggage and furniture, which were left to follow, and thus escaped destruction. Now at length these had arrived, and the unpacking and arrangement gave her constant thought and occupation, in which Morris

occasionally assisted.

One evening, indeed, he stayed in the Rectory with her, helping to hang some pictures till about half-past six o'clock, when they started for the Abbey. As it chanced, a heavy gale was blowing that night, one of the furious winter storms which are common on this coast, and its worst gusts beat upon Stella so fiercely that she could scarcely stand, and was glad to accept the support of Morris's arm. As they struggled along the high road thus, a particularly savage blast tore the hood of Stella's ulster from her head, whereupon, leaning over her in such a position that his face was necessarily quite close to her own, with some difficulty he managed to replace the hood.

It was while Morris was so engaged that a dog-cart, which because of the roar of the wind he did not hear, and because of his position he could not see until it was almost passing them, came slowly down the road.

Then catching the gleam of the lamps he looked up and started back, thinking that they were being run into, to perceive that the occupants of the dog-cart were Stephen and Eliza Layard.

At the same moment Stephen recognised them, as indeed he could scarcely help doing with the light of the powerful lamp shining full upon their faces. He shouted something to his sister, who also stared coldly at the pair. Then a kind of fury seemed to seize the little man; at any rate, he shook his clenched fist in a menacing fashion, and brought down the

whip with a savage cut upon the horse. As the animal sprang forward, moreover, Morris could almost have sworn that he heard the words "kissing her," spoken in Stephen's voice, followed by a laugh from Eliza.

Then the dog-cart vanished into the darkness, and the incident was closed.

For a moment Morris stood angry and astonished, but reflecting that in this wind his ears might have deceived him, and that, at any rate, Stella had heard nothing through her thick frieze hood, he once more offered his arm and walked forward.

The next day was Sunday, when, as usual, he escorted Stella to church. The Layards were there also, but he noticed that, somewhat ostentatiously, they hurried from the building immediately on the conclusion of the service, and it struck him that this demonstration might have some meaning. Eliza, whom he afterwards observed, engaged apparently in eager conversation with a knot of people on the roadway, was, as he knew well, no friend to him, for reasons which he could guess. Nor, as he had heard from various quarters, was she any friend of Stella Fregelius, any more than she had been to Jane Rose. It struck him that even now she might be employed in sowing scandal about them both, and for Stella's sake the thought made him furious. But even if it were so he did not see what he could do; therefore he tried to think he was mistaken, and to dismiss the matter from his mind.

Colonel Monk had written to say that he was coming home on the Wednesday, but he did not, in fact, put in an appearance till the half-past six train on the following Saturday evening, when he arrived beautifully dressed in the most irreproachable black, and in a very good temper.

"Ah, Morris, old fellow," he said, "I am very pleased to see you again. After all, there is no place like home, and at my time of life nothing to equal quiet. I can't tell you how sick I got of that French hole. If it hadn't been for Mary, and my old friend, Lady Rawlins, who, as usual, was in trouble with that wretched husband of hers--he is an imbecile now, you know--I should have been back long before. Well, how are you getting on?"

"Oh, pretty well, thank you, father," Morris answered, in that rather restrained voice which was natural to him when conversing with his parent. "I think, I really think I have nearly perfected my aerophone."

"Have you? Well, then, I hope you will make something out of it after all these years; not that it much matters now, however," he added contentedly. "By the way, that reminds me, how are our two guests, the new parson and his daughter? That was a queer story about your finding her on the wreck. Are they still here?"

"Yes; but the old gentleman is out of bed now, and he expects to be able

to move into the Rectory on Monday."

"Does he? Well, they must have given you some company while you were alone. There is no time like the present. I will go up and see him before I dress for dinner."

Accordingly Morris conducted his father to the Abbot's chamber, and introduced him to the clergyman. Mr. Fregelius was seated in his arm-chair, with a crutch by his side, and on learning who his visitor was, made a futile effort to rise.

"Pray, pray, sir," said the Colonel, "keep seated, or you will certainly hurt your leg again."

"When I should be obliged to inflict myself upon you for another five or six weeks," replied Mr. Fregelius.

"In that case, sir," said the Colonel, with his most courteous bow, "and for that reason only I should consider the accident fortunate," by these happy words making of his guest a devoted friend for ever.

"I don't know how to thank you; I really don't know how to thank you."

"Then pray, Mr. Fregelius, leave the thanks unspoken. What would you have had us--or, rather, my son--do? Turn a senseless, shattered man from his door, and that man his future spiritual pastor and master?"

"But there was more. He, Mr. Monk, I mean, saved my daughter Stella's life. You know, a block or a spar fell on me immediately after the ship struck. Then those cowardly dogs of sailors, thinking that she must founder instantly, threw me into the boat and rowed away, leaving her to her fate in the cabin; whereon your son, acting on some words which I spoke in my delirium, sailed out alone at night and rescued her."

"Yes, I heard something, but Morris is not too communicative. The odd thing about the whole affair, so far as I can gather, is that he should have discovered that there was anybody left on board. But he is a curious fellow, Morris; those things which one would expect him to know he never does know; and the things that nobody else has ever heard of he seems to have at his fingers' ends by instinct, or second sight, or something. Well, it has all turned out for the best, hasn't it?"

"Oh, yes, I suppose so," answered Mr. Fregelius, glancing at his injured leg. "At any rate, we are both alive and have not lost many of our belongings."

"Quite so; and under the circumstances you should be uncommonly thankful. But I need not tell a parson that. Well, I can only say that I am delighted to have such a good opportunity of making your acquaintance, which I am sure will lead to our pulling together in parish affairs like a pair of matched horses. Now I must go and dress. But I tell you what, I'll come and smoke a cigar with you afterwards,

and put you au fait with all our various concerns. You'll find them a nice lot in this parish, I can tell you, a nice lot. Old Tomley just gave them up as a bad job."

"I hope I shan't do that," replied Mr. Fregelius, after his retreating form.

The Colonel was down to dinner first, and standing warming himself at the library fire when Stella, once more in honour of his arrival arrayed in her best dress, entered the room. The Colonel put up his eyeglass and looked at her as she came down its length.

"By Jove!" he thought to himself, "I didn't know that the clergyman's daughter was like this; nobody ever said so. After all, that fellow Morris can't be half such a fool as he looks, for he kept it dark." Then he stepped forward with outstretched hand.

"You must allow me to introduce myself, Miss Fregelius," he said with an old-fashioned and courtly bow, "and to explain that I have the honour to be my son's father."

She bowed and answered: "Yes, I think I should have known that from the likeness."

"Hum!" said the Colonel. "Even at my age I am not certain that I am altogether flattered. Morris is an excellent fellow, and very clever

at electrical machines; but I have never considered him remarkable for personal beauty--not exactly an Adonis, or an Apollo, or a Narcissus, you know."

"I should doubt whether any of them had such a nice face," replied Stella with a smile.

"My word! Now, that is what I call a compliment worth having. But I hear the gentleman himself coming. Shall I repeat it to him?"

"No, please don't, Colonel Monk. I did not mean it for compliment, only for an answer."

"Your wish is a command; but may I make an exception in favour of Miss Porson, who prospectively owns the nice face in question? She would be delighted to know it so highly rated;" and he glanced at her sharply, the look of a man of the world who is trying to read a woman's heart.

"By all means," answered Stella, in an indifferent voice, but recognising in the Colonel one who, as friend or foe, must be taken into account. Then Morris came in, and they went to dinner.

Here also Colonel Monk was very pleasant. He made Stella tell the story of the shipwreck and of her rescue, and generally tried to draw her out in every possible way. But all the while he was watching and taking note of many things. Before they had been together for five minutes he

observed that this couple, his son and their visitor, were on terms of extreme intimacy--intimacy so extreme and genuine that in two instances, at least, each anticipated what the other was going to say, without waiting for any words to be spoken. Thus Stella deliberately answered a question that Morris had not put, and he accepted the answer and continued the argument quite as a matter of course. Also, they seemed mysteriously to understand each other's wants, and, worst of all, he noted that when speaking they never addressed each other by name. Evidently just then each of them had but one "you" in the world.

Now, the Colonel had not passed through very varied experiences and studied many sides and conditions of life for nothing; indeed, he would himself explain that he was able to see as far into a brick wall as other folk.

The upshot of all this was that first he thought Morris a very lucky fellow to be an object of undoubted admiration to those beautiful eyes. (It may be explained that the Colonel throughout life had been an advocate of taking such goods as the gods provided; something of a worshipper, too, at the shrine of lovely Thais.) His second reflection was that under all the circumstances it seemed quite time that he returned home to look after him.

"Now, Miss Fregelius," he said, as she rose to leave the table, "when Morris and I have had a glass of wine, and ten minutes to chat over matters connected with his poor uncle's death, I am going to ask you to

do me a favour before I go up to smoke a cigar with your father. It is that you will play me a tune on the violin and sing me a song."

"Did Mr. Monk tell you that I played and sang?" she asked.

"No, he did not. Indeed, Mr. Monk has told me nothing whatsoever about you. His, as you may have observed, is not a very communicative nature. The information came from a much less interesting, though, for aught I know, from a more impartial source--the fat page-boy, Thomas, who is first tenor in the Wesleyan chapel, and therefore imagines that he understands music."

"But how could Thomas----" began Morris, when his father cut him short and answered:

"Oh, I'll tell you, quite simply. I had it from the interesting youth's own lips as he unpacked my clothes. It seems that the day before the news of your uncle's death reached this place, Thomas was aroused from his slumbers by hearing what he was pleased to call 'hangels a-'arping and singing.' As soon as he convinced himself that he still lingered on the earth, drawn by the sweetness of the sounds, 'just in his jacket and breeches,' he followed them, until he was sure that they proceeded from your workshop, the chapel.

"Now, as you know, on the upstair passage there still is that queer slit through which the old abbots used to watch the monks at their devotions.

Finding the shutter unlocked, the astute Thomas followed their example, as well as he could, for he says there was no light in the chapel except that of the fire, by which presently he made out your figure, Miss Fregelius, sometimes playing the violin, and sometimes singing, and that of Morris--again I must quote--'a-sitting in a chair by the fire with his 'ands at the back of 'is 'ead, a-staring at the floor and rocking 'imself as though he felt right down bad.' No, don't interrupt me, Morris; I must tell my story. It's very amusing.

"Well, Miss Fregelius, he says--and, mind you, this is a great compliment--that you sang and played till he felt as though he would cry when at last you sank down quite exhausted in a chair. Then, suddenly realising that he was very cold, and hearing the stable clock strike two, he went back to bed, and that's the end of the tale. Now you will understand why I have asked you this favour. I don't see why Morris and Thomas should keep it all to themselves."

"I shall be delighted," answered Stella, who, although her cheeks were burning, and she knew that the merciless Colonel was taking note of the fact, on the whole had gone through the ordeal remarkably well. Then she left the room.

As soon as the door closed Morris turned upon his father angrily.

"Oh! my dear boy," the Colonel said, "please do not begin to explain. I know it's all perfectly right, and there is nothing to explain. Why

shouldn't you get an uncommonly pretty girl with a good voice to sing to you--while you are still in a position to listen? But if you care to take my advice, next time you will see that the shutter of that hagioscope, or whatever they call it, is locked, as such elevated delights 'a deux' are apt to be misinterpreted by the vulgar. And now, there's enough of this chaff and nonsense. I want to speak to you about the executorship and matters connected with the property generally."

Half an hour later, when the Colonel appeared in the drawing-room, the violin was fetched, and Stella played it and sang afterwards to a piano-forte accompaniment. The performance was not of the same standard, by any means, as that which had delighted Thomas, for Stella did not feel the surroundings quite propitious. Still, with her voice and touch she could not fail, and the result was that before she had done the Colonel grew truly enthusiastic.

"I know a little of music," he said, "and I have heard most of the best singers and violinists during the last forty years; but in the face of all those memories I hope you will allow me to congratulate you, Miss Fregelius. There are some notes in your voice which really reduce me to the condition of peeping Thomas, and, hardened old fellow that I am, almost make me feel inclined to cry."