

CHAPTER XV

THREE INTERVIEWS

The next day was a Sunday, and the Colonel went to church, wearing a hat-band four inches deep. Morris, however, declined to accompany him, saying that he had a letter to write to Mary; whereon his father, who at first was inclined to be vexed, replied that he could not be better employed, and that he was to give her his love. Then he asked if Miss Fregelius was coming, but somewhat to his disappointment, was informed that she wished to stay with her father.

"I wonder," thought the Colonel to himself as he strolled to the church, now and again acknowledging greetings or stopping to chat with one of the villagers--"I wonder if they are going to have a little sacred music together in the chapel. If so, upon my soul, I should like to make the congregation. And that pious fellow Morris, too--the blameless Morris--to go philandering about in this fashion. I hope it won't come to Mary's ears; but if it does, luckily, with all her temper, she is a sensible woman, and knows that even Jove nods at times."

After the service the Colonel spoke to various friends, accepted their condolences upon the death of Mr. Porson, and finally walked down the road with Eliza Layard.

"You must have found that all sorts of strange things have happened at

the Abbey since you have been away, Colonel Monk," she said presently in a sprightly voice.

"Well, yes; at least I don't know. I understand that Morris has improved that blessed apparatus of his, and the new parson and his daughter have floated to our doors like driftwood. By the way, have you seen Miss Fregelius?"

"Seen her? Yes, I have seen her."

"She is a wonderfully captivating girl, isn't she? So unusual, with those great eyes of hers that seem to vary with the light----"

"Like a cat's," snapped Eliza.

"The light within--I was going to say."

"Oh! I thought you meant the light without. Well, she may be fascinating--to men, but as I am only a woman, I cannot be expected to appreciate that. You see we look more to other things."

"Ah. Well, so far as I am a judge she seemed to me to be pretty well set up in them also. She has a marvellous voice, is certainly a first-class violinist, and I should say extremely well-read, especially in Norse literature."

"Oh! I daresay she is a genius as well as a beauty."

"I gather," said the Colonel with a smile, "that you do not like Miss Fregelius. As my acquaintance with her is limited, would you think me rude if I asked why?"

"How can I be expected to like her, seeing----" and she paused.

"Seeing what, Miss Layard?"

"What, haven't you heard? I thought it was common property."

He shook his head. "I have heard nothing. Go on, pray, this is quite interesting."

"That she led on that silly brother of mine until he proposed to her--yes, proposed to her!--and then refused him. Stephen has been like a crazy creature ever since, moaning, and groaning, and moping till I think that he will go off his head, instead of returning thanks to Providence for a merciful escape."

The Colonel set his lips as though to whistle, then checked himself.

"Under the circumstances, presuming them to be accurately stated, I am not prepared to say who is to be congratulated or who should thank Providence. These things are so individual, are they not? But if one

thing is clear, whatever else she is or is not, Miss Fregelius cannot be a fortune-hunter, although she must want money."

"She may want other things more."

"Perhaps. But I am very stupid, I am afraid I do not understand."

"Men, for instance," suggested Eliza.

"Dear me! that sounds almost carnivorous. I am afraid that there are not many about here to satisfy her appetite. Your brother, Morris, the curate at Morton, and myself, if at my age I may creep into that honourable company, are the only single creatures within four miles, and from these Stephen and Morris must apparently be eliminated."

"Why should Morris be eliminated?"

"A reason may occur to you."

"Do you mean because he is engaged? What on earth does that matter?"

"Nothing--in the East--but, rightly or wrongly, we have decided upon a monogamous system; a man can't marry two wives, Miss Layard."

"But he can throw over one girl to marry another."

"Do you suggest that Morris is contemplating this experiment?"

"I? I suggest nothing; all I know is----"

"Well, now, what do you know?"

"If you wish me to tell you, as perhaps I ought, I know this, Colonel Monk, that the other night, when I was driving along the Rectory road, I saw your son, Mr. Monk, kissing this wonderful Miss Fregelius; that is all, and Stephen saw it also, you ask him."

"Thank you; I think I would rather not. But what an odd place for him to choose for this interchange of early Christian courtesies! Also--if you are not mistaken--how well it illustrates that line in the hymn this morning:

"'How many a spot defiles the robe that wraps an earthly saint.'

Such adventures seem scarcely in Morris's line, and I should have thought that even an inexperienced saint would have been more discreet."

"Men always jest at serious things," said Eliza severely.

"Which do you mean--the saints or the kissing? Both are serious enough, but the two in combination----"

"Don't you believe me?" asked Eliza.

"Of course. But could you give me a few details?"

Eliza could and did--with amplifications.

"Now, what do you say, Colonel Monk?" she asked triumphantly.

"I say that I think you have made an awkward mistake, Miss Layard. It seems to me that all you saw is quite consistent with the theory that he was buttoning or arranging the young lady's hood. I understand that the wind was very high that night."

Eliza started; this was a new and unpleasant interpretation which she hastened to repudiate. "Arranging her hood, indeed----"

"When he might have been kissing her? You cannot understand such moderation. Still, it is possible, and he ought to have the benefit of the doubt. Witnesses to character would be valuable in such a case, and his--not to mention the lady's--is curiously immaculate."

"Of course you are entitled to your own opinion, but I have mine."

Suddenly the Colonel changed his bantering, satirical tone, and became stern and withering.

"Miss Layard," he said, "does it occur to you that on evidence which would not suffice to convict a bicyclist of riding on a footpath, you are circulating a scandal of which the issue might be very grave to both the parties concerned?"

"I am not circulating anything. I was telling you privately;" replied Eliza, still trying to be bold.

"I am glad to hear it. I understand that neither you nor your brother have spoken of this extraordinary tale, and I am quite certain that you will not speak of it in the future."

"I cannot answer for my brother," she said sulkily.

"No, but in his own interest and in yours I trust that you will make him understand that if I hear a word of this I shall hold him to account. Also, that his propagation of such a slander will react upon you, who were with him."

"How?" asked Eliza, now thoroughly frightened, for when he chose the Colonel could be very crushing.

"Thus: Your brother's evidence is that of an interested person which no one will accept; and of yours, Miss Layard, it might be inferred that it was actuated by jealousy of a charming and quite innocent girl; or, perhaps, by other motives even worse, which I would rather you did not

ask me to suggest."

Eliza did not ask him. She was too wise. As she knew well, when roused the Colonel was a man with a bitter tongue and a good memory.

"I am sure I am the last person who would wish to do mischief," she said in a humble voice.

"Of course, I know that, I know that. Well, now we understand each other, so I must be turning home. Thank you so much for having been quite candid with me. Good morning, Miss Layard; remember me to Stephen."

"Phew!" reflected the Colonel to himself, "that battle is won--after a fashion--but just about forty-eight hours too late. By this time that vixen of a woman has put the story all over the place. Oh, Morris, you egregious ass, if you wanted to take to kissing like a schoolboy, why the deuce did you select the high road for the purpose? This must be put a stop to. I must take steps, and at once. They mustn't be seen together again, or there will be trouble with Mary. But how to do it? how to do it? That is the question, and one to which I must find an answer within the next two hours. What a kettle of fish! What a pretty kettle of fish!"

In due course, and after diligent search, he found the answer to this question.

At lunch time the Colonel remarked casually that he had walked a little way with Miss Layard, who mentioned that she had seen them--i.e., his son and Miss Fregelius--struggling through the gale the other night. Then he watched the effect of this shot. Morris moved his chair and looked uncomfortable; clearly he was a most transparent sinner. But on Stella it took no effect.

"As usual," reflected the Colonel, "the lady has the most control. Or perhaps he tried to kiss her and she wouldn't let him, and a consciousness of virtue gives her strength."

After luncheon the Colonel paid a visit to Mr. Fregelius, ostensibly to talk to him about the proposed restoration of the chancel, for which he, as holder of the great tithes, was jointly liable with the rector, a responsibility that, in the altered circumstances of the family, he now felt himself able to face. When this subject was exhausted, which did not take long, as Mr. Fregelius refused to express any positive opinion until he had inspected the church, the Colonel's manner grew portentously solemn.

"My dear sir," he said, "there is another matter, a somewhat grave one, upon which, for both our sakes and the sakes of those immediately concerned, I feel bound to say a few words."

Mr. Fregelius, who was a timid man, looked very much alarmed. A conviction that the "grave matter" had something to do with Stella flashed into his mind, but all he said was:

"I am afraid I don't understand, Colonel Monk."

"No; indeed, how should you? Well, to come to the point, it has to do with that very charming daughter of yours and my son Morris."

"I feared as much," groaned the clergyman.

"Indeed! I thought you said you did not understand."

"No, but I guessed; wherever Stella goes things seem to happen."

"Exactly; well, things have happened here. To be brief, I mean that a lot of silly women have got up a scandal about them--no, scandal is too strong a word--gossip."

"What is alleged?" asked Mr. Fregelius faintly.

"Well, that your daughter threw over that young ass, Stephen Layard, because--the story seems to me incredible, I admit--she had fallen violently in love with Morris. Further that she and the said Morris were seen embracing at night on the Rectory road, which I don't believe, as

the witnesses are Layard, who is prejudiced, and his sister, who is the most ill-bred, bitter, and disappointed woman in the county. Lastly, and this is no doubt true, that they are generally on terms of great intimacy, and we all know where that leads to between a man and woman--'Plato, thy confounded fantasies,' etc. You see, when people sit up singing to each other alone till two in the morning--I don't mean that Morris sings, he has no more voice than a crow; he does the appreciative audience--well, other people will talk, won't they?"

"I suppose so, the world being what it is," sighed Mr. Fregelius.

"Exactly; the world being what it is, and men and women what they are, a most unregenerate lot and 'au fond' very primitive, as I daresay you may have observed."

"What is to be done?"

"Well, under other circumstances, I should have said, Nothing at all except congratulate them most heartily, more especially my son. But in this case there are reasons which make such a course impossible. As you know, Morris is engaged to be married to my niece, Miss Porson, and it is a contract which, even if he wished it, honour would forbid him to break, for family as well as for personal reasons."

"Quite so, quite so; it is not to be thought of. But again I ask--What is to be done?"

"Is that not rather a question for you to consider? I suggest that you had better speak to your daughter; just a hint, you know, just a hint."

"Upon my word, I'd rather not. Stella can be so--decided--at times, and we never seem quite to understand each other. I did speak to her the other day when Mr. Layard wished to marry her, a match I was naturally anxious for, but the results were not satisfactory."

"Still, I think you might try."

"Very well, I will try; and, Colonel Monk, I cannot tell you how grieved I am to have brought all this trouble on you."

"Not a bit," answered the Colonel cheerfully. "I am an old student of human nature, and I rather enjoy it; it's like watching the puppets on a stage. Only we mustn't let the comedy grow into a tragedy."

"Ah! that's what I am afraid of, some tragedy. Stella is a woman who takes things hard, and if any affection really has sprung up----"

"----It will no doubt evaporate with the usual hysterics and morning headache. Bless me! I have known dozens of them, and felt some myself in my time--the headaches, I mean, not the other things. Don't be alarmed if she gets angry, Mr. Fregelius, but just appeal to her reason; she will see the force of it afterwards."

An hour or so later the Colonel started for a walk on the beach to look at some damage which a high tide had done to the cliff. As he was nearing the Abbey steps on his return he saw the figure of a woman standing quite still upon the sands. An inspection through his eyeglass revealed that it was Stella, and instinct told him her errand.

"This is rather awkward," he thought, as he braced himself to battle, "especially as I like that girl and don't want to hurt her feelings. Hullo! Miss Fregelius, are you taking the air? You should walk, or you will catch cold."

"No, Colonel Monk, I was waiting for you."

"Waiting for me? Me! This is indeed an honour, and one which age appreciates."

She waved aside his two-edged badinage. "You have been speaking to my father," she said.

Instantly the Colonel assumed a serious manner, not the most serious, such as he wore at funerals, but still one suited to a grave occasion.

"Yes, I have."

"You remember all that you said?"

"Certainly, Miss Fregelius; and I assume that for the purposes of this conversation it need not be repeated."

She bowed her head, and replied, "I have come to explain and to tell you three things. First, that all these stories are false except that about the singing. Secondly, that whoever is responsible for them has made it impossible that I should live in Monksland, so I am going to London to earn my own living there. And, thirdly, that I hope you will excuse my absence from dinner as I think the more I keep to myself until we go to-morrow, the better; though I reserve to myself the right to speak to Mr. Monk on this subject and to say good-bye to him."

"She is taking it hard and she is fond of him--deuced fond of him, poor girl," thought the Colonel; but aloud he said, "My dear Miss Fregelius, I never believed the stories. As for the principal one, common sense rebels against it. All I said to your father was that there appears to be a lot of talk about the place, and, under the circumstances of my son's engagement, that he might perhaps give you a friendly hint."

"Oh! indeed; he did not put it quite like that. He gave me to understand that you had told him--that I was--so--so much in love with Mr. Monk that on this account I had--rejected Mr. Layard."

"Please keep walking," said the Colonel, "or you really will catch

cold." Then suddenly he stopped, looked her sharply in the face, much as he had done to Eliza, and said, "Well, and are you not in love with him?"

For a moment Stella stared at him indignantly. Then suddenly he saw a blush spread upon her face to be followed by an intense pallor, while the pupils of the lovely eyes enlarged themselves and grew soft. Next instant she put her hand to her heart, tottered on her feet, and had he not caught her would perhaps have fallen.

"I do not think I need trouble you to answer my question, which, indeed, now that I think of it, was one I had no right to put," he said as she recovered herself.

"Oh, my God!" moaned Stella, wringing her hands; "I never knew it till this moment. You have brought it home to me; you, yes, you!" and she burst out weeping.

"Here are the hysterics," thought the Colonel, "and I am afraid that the headache will be bad to-morrow morning."

To her, however, he said very tenderly, "My dear girl, my dear girl, pray do not distress yourself. These little accidents will happen in the best regulated hearts, and believe me, you will get over it in a month or two."

"Accident!" she said. "It is no accident; it is Fate!--I see it all now--and I shall never get over it. However, that is my own affair, and I have no right to trouble you with my misfortunes."

"Oh! but you will indeed, and though you may think the advice hard, I will tell you the best way."

She looked up in inquiry.

"Change your mind and marry Stephen Layard. He is not at all a bad fellow, and--there are obvious advantages."

This was the Colonel's first really false move, as he himself felt before the last word had left his lips.

"Colonel Monk," she said, "because I am unfortunate is it any reason that you should insult me?"

"Miss Fregelius, to my knowledge I have never insulted any woman; and certainly I should not wish to begin with one who has just honoured me with her confidence."

"Is it not an insult," she answered with a sort of sob, "when a woman to her shame and sorrow has confessed--what I have--to bid her console herself by marriage with another man?"

"Now that you put it thus, I confess that perhaps some minds might so interpret an intention which did not exist. It seemed to me that, after a while, in marriage you would most easily forget a trouble which my son so unworthily has brought on you."

"Don't blame him for he does not deserve it. If anybody is to blame it is I; but in truth all those stories are false; we have neither of us done anything."

"Do not press the point, Miss Fregelius; I believe you."

"We have neither of us done anything," she repeated; "and, what is more, if you had not interfered, I do not think that I should have found out the truth; or, at least, not yet--till I saw him married, perhaps, when it would have been no matter."

"When you see a man walking in his sleep you do your best to stop him," said the Colonel.

"And so cause him to fall over the precipice and be dashed to bits. Oh! you should have let me finish my journey. Then I should have come back to the bed that I have made to lie on, and waked to find myself alone, and nobody would have been hurt except myself who caused the evil."

The Colonel could not continue this branch of the conversation. Even to him, a hardened vessel, as he had defined himself, it was too painful.

"You said you mean to earn a living in London. How?"

"By my voice and violin, if one can sing and play with a sore heart. I have an old aunt, a sister of my father's, who is a music mistress, with whom I daresay I can arrange to live, and who may be able to get me some introductions."

"I hope that I can help you there, and I will to the best of my ability; indeed, if necessary, I will go to town and see about things. Allow me to add this, Miss Fregelius, that I think you are doing a very brave thing, and, what is more, a very wise one; and I believe that before long we shall hear of you as the great new contralto."

She shrugged her shoulders. "It may be; I don't care. Good-bye. By the way, I wish to see Mr. Monk once more before I go; it would be better for us all. I suppose that you don't object to that, do you?"

"Miss Fregelius, my son is a man advancing towards middle age. It is entirely a point for you and him to decide, and I will only say that I have every confidence in you."

"Thank you," she answered, and turning, walked rapidly down the lonely beach till her figure melted into the gathering gloom of the winter's night. Once, however, when she thought that she was out of eyeshot, he saw her stop with her face towards the vast and bitter sea, and saw also

that she was wringing her hands in an agony of the uttermost despair.

"She looks like a ghost," said the Colonel aloud with a little shiver, "like a helpless, homeless ghost, with the world behind her and the infinite in front, and nothing to stand on but a patch of shifting sand, wet with her own tears."

When the Colonel grew thus figurative and poetical it may be surmised by anyone who has taken the trouble to study his mixed and somewhat worldly character that he was deeply moved. And he was moved; more so, indeed, than he had been since the death of his wife. Why? He would have found it hard to explain. On the face of it, the story was of a trivial order, and in some of its aspects rather absurd. Two young people who happened to be congenial, but one of whom was engaged, chance to be thrown together for a couple of months in a country house. Although there is some gossip, nothing at all occurs between them beyond a little perfectly natural flirtation. The young man's father, hearing the gossip, speaks to the young lady in order that she may take steps to protect herself and his son against surmise and misinterpretation. Thereupon a sudden flood of light breaks upon her soul, by which she sees that she is really attached to the young man, and being a woman of unusual character, or perhaps absurdly averse to lying even upon such a subject, in answer to a question admits that this is so, and that she very properly intends to go away.

Could anything be more commonplace, more in the natural order of events?

Why, then, was he moved? Oh! it was that woman's face and eyes. Old as he might be, he felt jealous of his son; jealous to think that for him such a woman could wear this countenance of wonderful and thrilling woe. What was there in Morris that it should have called forth this depth of passion undefiled? Now, if there were no Mary--but there was a Mary, it was folly to pursue such a line of thought.

From sympathy for Stella, which was deep and genuine, to anger with his son proved to the Colonel an easy step. Morris was that worst of sinners, a hypocrite. Morris, being engaged to one woman, had taken advantage of her absence deliberately to involve the affections of another, or, at any rate, caused her considerable inconvenience. He was wroth with Morris, and what was more, before he grew an hour older he would let him have a piece of his mind.

He found the sinner in his workshop, the chapel, making mathematical calculations, the very sight of which added to his father's indignation. The man, he reflected to himself, who under these circumstances could indulge an abnormal talent for mathematics, especially on Sunday, must be a cold-blooded brute. He entered the place slamming the door behind him; and Morris looking up noted with alarm, for he hated rows, that there was war in his eye.

"Won't you take a chair, father?" he said.

"No, thank you; I would rather say what I have to say standing."

"What is the matter?"

"The matter is, sir, that I find that by your attentions you have made that poor girl, Miss Fregelius, while she was a guest in my house, the object of slander and scandal to every ill-natured gossip in the three parishes."

Morris's quiet, thoughtful eyes flashed in an ominous and unusual manner.

"If you were not my father," he said, "I should ask you to change your tone in speaking to me on such a subject; but as things are I suppose that I must submit to it, unless you choose otherwise."

"The facts, Morris," answered his father, "justify any language that I can use."

"Did you get these facts from Stephen Layard and Miss Layard? Ah! I guessed as much. Well, the story is a lie; I was merely arranging her hood which she could not do herself, as the wind forced her to use her hand to hold her dress down."

The thought of his own ingenuity in hitting on the right solution of the story mollified the Colonel not a little.

"Pshaw," he said, "I knew that. Do you suppose that I believed you fool enough to kiss a girl on the open road when you had every opportunity of kissing her at home? I know, too, that you have never kissed her at all; or, ostensibly at any rate, done anything that you shouldn't do."

"What is my offence, then?" asked Morris.

"Your offence is that you have got her talked about; that you have made her in love with you--don't deny it; I have it from her own lips. That you have driven her out of this place to earn a living in London as best she may, and that, being yourself an engaged man"--here once more the Colonel drew a bow at a venture--"you are what is called in love with her yourself."

These two were easy victims to the skill of so experienced an archer. The shaft went home between the joints of his son's harness, and Morris sank back in his chair and turned white. Generosity, or perhaps the fear of exciting more unpleasant consequences, prevented the Colonel from following up this head of his advantage.

"There is more, a great deal more, behind," he went on. "For instance, all this will probably come to Mary's ears."

"Certainly it will; I shall tell her of it myself."

"Which will be tantamount to breaking your engagement. May I ask if that

is your intention?"

"No; but supposing that all you say were true, and that it was my intention, what then?"

"Then, sir, to my old-fashioned ideas you would be a dishonourable fellow, to cast away the woman who has only you to look to in the world, that you may put another woman who has taken your fancy in her place."

Morris bit his lip.

"Still speaking on that supposition," he replied, "would it not be more dishonourable to marry her; would it not be kinder, shameful as it may be, to tell her all the truth and let her seek some worthier man?"

The Colonel shrugged his shoulders. "I can't split hairs," he said, "or enter on an argument of sentimental casuistry. But I tell you this, Morris, although you are my only son, and the last of our name, that rather than do such a thing, under all the circumstances, it would be better that you should take a pistol and blow your brains out."

"Very probably," answered Morris, "but would you mind telling me also what are the exact circumstances which would in your opinion so aggravate this particular case?"

"You have a copy of your uncle Porson's will in that drawer; give it

me."

Morris obeyed, and his father searched for, and read the following sentence: "In consideration of the forthcoming marriage between his son Morris and my daughter Mary, the said testator 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."

"Well," said Morris.

"Well," replied the Colonel coolly, "those debts in all amounted to 19,543 pounds. No wonder you seem astonished, but they have been accumulating for a score of years. There's the fact, any way, so discussion is no use. Now do you understand? 'In consideration of the forthcoming marriage,' remember."

"I shall be rich some day; that machine you laugh at will make me rich; already I have been approached. I might repay this money."

"Yes, and you might not; such hopes and expectations have a way of coming to nothing. Besides, hang it all, Morris, you know that there is more than money in the question."

Morris hid his face in his hands for a moment; when he removed them it was ashen. "Yes," he said, "things are unfortunate. You remember that

you were very anxious that I should engage myself, and Mary was so good as to accept me. Perhaps, I cannot say, I should have done better to have waited till I felt some real impulse towards marriage. However, that is all gone by, and, father, you need not be in the least afraid; there is not the slightest fear that I shall attempt to do anything of which you would disapprove."

"I was sure you wouldn't, old fellow," answered the Colonel in a friendly tone, "not when you came to think. Matters seem to have got into a bit of a tangle, don't they? Most unfortunate that charming young lady being brought to this house in such a fashion. Really, it looks like a spite of what she called Fate. However, I have no doubt that it will all straighten itself somehow. By the way, she told me that she should wish to see you once to say good-bye before she went. Don't be vexed with me if, should she do so, I suggest to you to be very careful. Your position will be exceedingly painful and exceedingly dangerous, and in a moment all your fine resolutions may come to nothing; though I am sure that she does not wish any such thing, poor dear. Unless she really seeks this interview, I think, indeed, it would be best avoided."

Morris made no answer, and the Colonel went away somewhat weary and sorrowful. For once he had seen too much of his puppet-show.