

CHAPTER XVI

A MARRIAGE AND AFTER

Stella did not appear at dinner that night, or at breakfast next day. In the course of the morning, growing impatient, for he had explanations to make, Morris sent her a note worded thus:

"Can I see you?--M. M."

to which came the following answer:

"Not to-day. Meet me to-morrow at the Dead Church at three o'clock.
--Stella."

It was the only letter that he ever received from her.

That afternoon, December 23, Mr. Fregelius and his daughter moved to the Rectory in a fly that had been especially prepared to convey the invalid without shaking him. Morris did not witness their departure, as the Colonel, either by accident or design, had arranged to go with him on this day to inspect the new buildings which had been erected on the

Abbey Farm. Nor, indeed, were the names of the departed guests so much as mentioned at dinner that night. The incident of their long stay at the Abbey, with all its curious complications, was closed, and both father and son, by tacit agreement, determined to avoid all reference to it; at any rate for the present.

The Christmas Eve of that year will long be remembered in Monksland and all that stretch of coast as the day of the "great gale" which wrought so much damage on its shores. The winter's dawn was of extraordinary beauty, for all the eastern sky might have been compared to one vast flower, with a heart of burnished gold, and sepals and petals of many coloured fires. Slowly from a central point it opened, slowly its splendours spread across the heavens; then suddenly it seemed to wither and die, till where it had been was nothing but masses of grey vapour that arose, gathered, and coalesced into an ashen pall hanging low above the surface of the ashen sea. The coastguard, watching the glass, hoisted their warning cone, although as yet there was no breath of wind, and old sailormen hanging about in knots on the cliff and beach went to haul up their boats as high as they could drag them, knowing that it would blow hard by night.

About mid-day the sea began to be troubled, as though its waves were being pushed on by some force as yet unseen, and before two o'clock gusts of cold air from the nor'east travelled landwards off the ocean with a low moaning sound, which was very strange to hear.

As Morris trudged along towards the Dead Church he noticed, as we do notice such things when our minds are much preoccupied and oppressed, that these gusts were coming quicker and quicker, although still separated from each other by periods of aerial calm. Then he remembered that a great gale had been prophesied in the weather reports, and thought to himself that they portended its arrival.

He reached the church by the narrow spit of sand and shingle which still connected it with the shore, passed through the door in the rough brick wall, closing it behind him, and paused to look. Already under that heavy sky the light which struggled through the brine-encrusted eastern window was dim and grey. Presently, however, he discovered the figure of Stella seated in her accustomed place by the desolate-looking stone altar, whereon stood the box containing the aerophone that they had used in their experiments. She was dressed in her dark-coloured ulster, of which the hood was still drawn over her head, giving her the appearance of some cloaked nun, lingering, out of time and place, in the ruined habitations of her worship.

As he advanced she rose and pushed back the hood, revealing the masses of her waving hair, to which it had served as a sole covering. In silence Stella stretched out her hand, and in silence Morris took it; for neither of them seemed to find any words. At length she spoke, fixing her sad eyes upon his face, and saying:

"You understand that we meet to part. I am going to London to-morrow; my

father has consented."

"That is Christmas Day," he faltered.

"Yes, but there is an early train, the same that runs on Sundays."

Then there was another pause.

"I wish to ask your pardon," he said, "for all the trouble that I have brought upon you."

She smiled. "I think it is I who should ask yours. You have heard of these stories?"

"Yes, my father spoke to me; he told me of his conversation with you."

"All of it?"

"I do not know; I suppose so," and he hung his head.

"Oh!" she broke out in a kind of cry, "if he told you all----"

"You must not blame him," he interrupted. "He was very angry with me. He considered that I had behaved badly to you, and everybody, and I do not think that he weighed his words."

"I am not angry. Now that I think of it, what does it matter? I cannot help things, and the truth will out."

"Yes," he said, quite simply; "we love each other, so we may as well admit it before we part."

"Yes," she echoed, without disturbance or surprise; "I know now--we love each other."

These were the first intimate words that ever passed between them; this, their declaration, unusual even in the long history of the passions of men and women, and not the less so because neither of them seemed to think its fashion strange.

"It must always have been so," said Morris.

"Always," she answered, "from the beginning; from the time you saved my life and we were together in the boat and--perhaps, who can say?--before. I can see it now, only until they put light into our minds we did not understand. I suppose that sooner or later we should have found it out, for having been brought together nothing could ever have really kept us asunder."

"Nothing but death," he answered heavily.

"That is your old error, the error of a lack of faith," she replied,

with one of her bright smiles. "Death will unite us beyond the possibility of parting. I pray God that it may come quickly--to me, not to you. You have your life to lead; mine is finished. I do not mean the life of my body, but the real life, that within."

"I think that you are right; I grow sure of it. But here there is nothing to be done."

"Of course," she answered eagerly; "nothing. Do you suppose that I wished to suggest such a treachery?"

"No, you are too pure and good."

"Good I am not--who is?--but I believe that I am pure."

"It is bitter," groaned Morris.

"Why so? My heart aches, and yet through the pain I rejoice, because I know that it is well with us. Had you not loved me, then it would have been bitter. The rest is little. What does it matter when and how and where it comes about? To-day we part--for ever in the flesh. You will not look upon this mortal face of mine again."

"Why do you say so?"

"Because I feel that it is true."

He glanced up hastily, and she answered the question in his eyes.

"No--indeed--not that--I never thought of such a thing. I think it a crime. We are bid to endure the burden of our day. I shall go on weaving my web and painting my picture till, soon or late, God says, 'Hold,' and then I shall die gladly, yes, very gladly, because the real beginning is at hand."

"Oh! that I had your perfect faith," groaned Morris.

"Then, if you love me, learn it from me. Should I, of all people, tell you what is not true? It is the truth--I swear it is the truth. I am not deceived. I know, I know, I know."

"What do you know--about us?"

"That, when it is over, we shall meet again where there is no marriage, where there is nothing gross, where love perfect and immortal reigns and passion is forgotten. There that we love each other will make no heart sore, not even hers whom here, perhaps, we have wronged; there will be no jealousies, since each and all, themselves happy in their own way and according to their own destinies, will rejoice in the happiness of others. There, too, our life will be one life, our work one work, our thought one thought--nothing more shall separate us at all in that place where there is no change or shadow of turning. Therefore," and she

clasped her hands and looked upwards, her face shining like a saint's, although the tears ran down it, "therefore, 'O Death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?'"

"You talk like one upon the verge of it, who hears the beating of Death's wings. It frightens me, Stella."

"I know nothing of that; it may be to-night, or fifty years hence--we are always on the verge, and those Wings I have heard from childhood. Fifty, even seventy years, and after them--all the Infinite; one tiny grain of sand compared to the bed of the great sea, that sea from which it was washed at dawn to be blown back again at nightfall."

"But the dead forget--in that land all things are forgotten. Were you to die I should call to you and you would not answer; and when my time came, I might look for you and never find you."

"How dare you say it? If I die, search, and you shall see. No; do not search, wait. At your death I will be with you."

"Whatever happens in life or death--here or hereafter--swear that you will not forget me, and that you will love me only. Swear it, Stella."

"Come to this altar," she said, when she had thought a moment, "and give me your hand--so. Now, before my Maker and the Presences who surround us, I marry you, Morris Monk. Not in the flesh--with your flesh I have

nothing to do--but in the spirit. I take your soul to mine, I give my soul to yours; yours it was from its birth's day, yours it is, and when it ceases to be yours, let it perish everlastingly."

"So be it to both of us, for ever and for ever," he answered.

This, then, was their marriage, and as they walked hand in hand away from the ancient altar, which surely had never seen so strange a rite, there returned to Morris an idle fantasy which had entered his mind at this very spot when they landed one morning half-frozen after that night in the open boat. But he said nothing of it; for with the memory came a recollection of certain wandering words which that same day fell from Stella's lips, words at the thought of which his spirit thrilled and his flesh shuddered. What if she were near it, or he were near it, or both of them? What if this solemn ceremony of marriage mocked, yet made divine, had taken place upon the very threshold of its immortal consummation? She read his thought and answered:

"Remember always, far and near, it is the same thing; time is nothing; this oath of ours cannot be touched by time or earthly change."

"I will remember," he answered.

What more did they say? He never could be sure, nor does it matter, for what is written bears its gist.

"Go away first," she said presently; "I promised your father that I would bring no further trouble on you, so we must not be seen together. Go now, for the gale is rising fast and the darkness grows."

"This is hard to bear," he muttered, setting his teeth. "Are you sure that we shall not meet again in after years?"

"Sure. You look your last upon me, on the earthly Stella whom you know and love."

"It must be done," he said.

"It must be done," she echoed. "Good-bye, husband, till that appointed hour of meeting when I may call you so without shame," and she held out her hand.

He took and pressed it; speak he could not. Then, like a man stricken in years, he passed down the church with bent head and shambling feet. At the door he turned to look at her. She was standing erect and proud as a conqueror, her hand resting upon the altar. Even at that distance their eyes met, and in hers, lit with a wild and sudden ray from the sinking sun, he could see a strange light shine. Then he went out of the door and dragged it to behind him, to battle his way homeward through the roaring gale that stung and buffeted him like all the gathered spites and hammerings of Destiny.

This, then, was their parting, a parting pure and stern and high, unsolaced by one soft word, unsweetened by a single kiss. Yet it seems fitting that those who hope to meet in the light of the spirit should make their last farewells on earth beneath such solemn shadows.

And Stella? After all she was but a woman, a woman with a very human heart. She knew the truth indeed, to whom it was given to see before the due determined time of vision, but still she was troubled with that human heart, and weighed down by the flesh over which she triumphed. Now that he was gone, pride and strength seemed both to leave her, and with a low cry, like the cry of a wounded sea-bird, she cast herself down there upon the cold stones before the altar, and wept till her senses left her.

A great gale roared and howled. The waters, driven onwards by its furious breath, beat upon the eastern cliffs till these melted like snow beneath them, taking away field and church, town and protecting wall, and in return casting up the wrecks of ships and the bodies of dead men.

Morris could not sleep. Who could sleep in such an awful tempest? Who could sleep that had passed through such a parting? Oh! his heart ached, and he was as one sick to death, and with him continually was the thought of Stella, and before him came the vision of her eyes. He could not sleep, so rising, he dressed himself and went to the window. High

in the heavens swept clean of clouds by the furious blasts floated a wandering moon, throwing her ghastly light upon the swirling, furious sea. Shorewards rushed the great rollers in unending lines, there to break in thunder and seethe across the shingle till the sea-wall stopped them and sent the spray flying upwards in thin, white clouds.

"God help those in the power of the sea to-night," thought Morris, "for many of them will not keep Christmas here."

Then it seemed to his mind, excited by storm and sorrow, as though some power were drawing him, as though some voice were telling him that there was that which he must hear. Aimlessly, half-unconsciously he wandered to his workshop in the old chapel, turned on one of the lamps, and stood at the window watching the majestic progress of the storm, and thinking, thinking, thinking.

While he remained thus, suddenly, thrilling his nerves as though with a quick shock of pain, sharp and clear even in that roar and turmoil, rang out the sound of an electric bell. He started round and looked. Yes; as he thought in all the laboratory there was only one bell that could ring, none other had its batteries charged, and that bell was attached to the aerophone whereof the twin stood upon the altar in the Dead Church. The instrument was one of the pair with which he had carried out his experiments of the last two months.

His heart stood still. "Great God! What could have caused that bell

to ring?" It could not ring; it was a physical impossibility unless somebody were handling the sister instrument, and at four o'clock in the morning, who could be there, and except one, who would know its working? With a bound he was by the aerophone and had given the answering signal. Then instantly, as though she were standing at his side in the room, for this machine does not blur the voice or heighten its tone, he heard Stella speaking.

"Is it you who answer me?" she asked.

"Yes, yes," he said, "but where are you at this hour of the night?"

"Where you left me, in the Dead Church," floated back the quick reply through the raving breadths of storm. "Listen: After you went my strength gave out and I suppose that I fainted; at least, a little while ago I woke up from a deep sleep to find myself lying before the alter here. I was frightened, for I knew that it must be far into the night, and an awful gale is blowing which shakes the whole church. I went to the door and opened it, and by the light of the moon I saw that between me and the shore lies a raging sea hundreds of yards wide. Then I came back and threw out my mind to you, and tried to wake you, if you slept; tried to make you understand that I wished you to go to the aerophone and hear me."

"I will get help at once," broke in Morris.

"I beg you," came back the voice, "I beg you, do not stir. The time is very short; already the waves are dashing against the walls of the chancel, and I hear the water rumbling in the vaults beneath my feet. Listen!" her voice ceased, and in place of it there swelled the shriek of the storm which beat about the Dead Church, the rush, too, of the water in the hollow vaults and the crashing of old coffins as they were washed from their niches. Another instant, and Stella had cut off these sounds and was speaking again.

"It is useless to think of help, no boat, nothing could live upon that fearful sea; moreover, within five minutes this church must fall and vanish."

"My God! My God!" wailed Morris.

"Do not grieve; it is a waste of precious time, and do not stir till the end. I want you to know that I did not seek this death. I never dreamed of such a thing. You must tell my father so, and bid him not to mourn for me. It was my intention to leave the church within ten minutes of yourself. This cup is given to me by the hand of Fate. I did not fill it. Do you hear and understand?"

"I hear and understand," answered Morris.

"Now you see," she went on, "that our talk to-day was almost inspired. My web is woven, my picture is painted, and to me Heaven says, 'Hold.'

The thought that it might be so was in your mind, was it not?"

"Yes."

"And I answered your thought, telling you that time is nothing. This I tell you again for your comfort in the days that remain to you of life. Oh! I bless God; I bless God Who has dealt so mercifully to me. Where are now the long years of lonely suffering that I feared--I who stand upon the threshold of the Eternal? . . . I can talk no more, the water is rising in the church--already it is about my knees; but remember every word which I have said to you; remember that we are wed--truly wed, that I go to wait for you, and that even if you do not see me I will, if I may, be near you always--till you die, and afterwards will be with you always--always."

"Stay," cried Morris.

"What have you to say? Be swift, the water rises and the walls are cracking."

"That I love you now and for ever and for ever; that I will remember everything; and that I know beyond a doubt that you have seen, and speak the truth."

"Thank you for those blessed words, and for this life fare you well."

For a moment there was silence, or at least Stella's voice was silent, while Morris stood over the aerophone, the sweat running from his face, rocking like a drunken man in his agony and waiting for the end. Then suddenly loud, clear, and triumphant, broke upon his ears the sound of that song which he had heard her sing upon the sinking ship when her death seemed near; the ancient song of the Over-Lord. Once more at the last mortal ebb, while the water rose about her breast, Stella's instincts and blood had asserted themselves, and forgetting aught else, she was dying as her pagan forefathers had died, with the secret ancient chant upon her lips. Yes, she sang as Skarphedinn the hero sang while the flame ate out his life.

The song swelled on, and the great waters boomed an accompaniment. Then came a sound of crashing walls, and for a moment it ceased, only to rise again still clearer and more triumphant. Again a crash--a seething hiss--and the instrument was silent, for its twin was shattered. Shattered also was the fair shape that held the spirit of Stella.

Again and again Morris spoke eagerly, entreatingly, but the aerophone was dumb. So he ceased at length, and even then well nigh laughed when he thought that in this useless piece of mechanism he saw a symbol of his own soul, which also had lost its mate and could hold true converse

with no other.

Then he started up, and just as he was, ran out into the raving night.

Three hours later, when the sun rose upon Christmas Day, if any had been there to note him they might have seen a dishevelled man standing alone upon the lonely shore. There he stood, the back-wash of the mighty combers hissing about his knees as he looked seaward beneath the hollow of his hand at a spot some two hundred yards away, where one by one their long lines were broken into a churning yeast of foam.

Morris knew well what broke them--the fallen ruins of the church that was now Stella's sepulchre, and, oh! in that dark hour, he would have been glad to seek her where she lay.