

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE RETURN OF MARY

Curiously enough, indirectly, but in fact, it was the circumstance of Stella's sudden and mysterious death that made Morris a rich and famous man, and caused his invention of the aerophone to come into common use. Very early on the following morning, but not before, she was missed from the Rectory and sought far and wide. One of the first places visited by those who searched was the Abbey, whither they met Morris returning through the gale, wild-eyed, flying-haired, and altogether strange to see. They asked him if he knew what had become of Miss Fregelius.

"Yes," he replied, "she has been crushed or drowned in the ruins of the Dead Church, which was swept away by the gale last night."

Then they stared and asked how he knew this. He answered that, being unable to sleep that night on account of the storm, he had gone into his workshop when his attention was suddenly attracted by the bell of the aerophone, by means of which he learned that Miss Fregelius had been cut off from the shore in the church. He added that he ran as hard as he could to the spot, only to find at dawn that the building had entirely vanished in the gale, and that the sea had encroached upon the land by at least two hundred paces.

Of course these statements concerning the aerophone and its capabilities

were reported all over the world and much criticised--very roughly in some quarters. Thereupon Morris offered to demonstrate the truth of what he had said. The controversy proved sharp; but of this he was glad; it was a solace to him, perhaps even it prevented him from plunging headlong into madness. At first he was stunned; he did not feel very much. Then the first effects of the blow passed; a sense of the swiftness and inevitableness of this awful consummation seemed to sink down into his heart and crush him. The completeness of the tragedy, its Greek-play qualities, were overwhelming. Question and answer, seed and fruit--there was no space for thought or growth between them. The curtain was down upon the Temporal, and lo! almost before its folds had shaken to their place, it had risen upon the Eternal. His nature reeled beneath this knowledge and his loss. Had it not been for those suspicions and attacks it might have fallen.

The details of the struggle need not be entered into, as they have little to do with the life-story of Morris Monk. It is enough to say that in the end he more than carried out his promises under the severest conditions, and in the presence of various scientific bodies and other experts.

Afterwards came the natural results; the great aerophone company was floated, in which Morris as vendor received half the shares--he would take no cash--which shares, by the way, soon stood at five and a quarter. Also he found himself a noted man; was asked to deliver an address before the British Association; was nominated on the council

of a leading scientific society, and in due course after a year or two received one of the greatest compliments that can be paid to an Englishman, that of being elected to its fellowship, as a distinguished person, by the committee of a famous Club. Thus did Morris prosper greatly--very greatly, and in many different ways; but with all this part of his life we are scarcely concerned.

On the day of his daughter's death Morris visited Mr. Fregelius, for whom he had a message. He found the old man utterly crushed and broken.

"The last of the blood, Mr. Monk," he moaned, when Morris, hoarse-voiced and slow-worded, had convinced him of the details of the dreadful fact, "the last of the blood; and I left childless. At least you will feel for me and with me. You will understand."

It will be seen that although outside of some loose talk in the village, which indirectly had produced results so terrible, no one had ever suggested such a thing, curiously enough, by some intuitive process, Mr. Fregelius who, to a certain extent, at any rate, guessed his daughter's mind, took it for granted that she had been in love with Morris. He seemed to know also by the same deductive process that he was attached to her.

"I do, indeed," said Morris, with a sad smile, thinking that if only the clergyman could look into his heart he would perhaps be somewhat astonished at the depth of that understanding sympathy.

"I told you," went on Mr. Fregelius, "and you laughed at me, that it was most unlucky her having sung that hateful Norse song, the 'Greeting to Death,' when you found her upon the steamer Trondhjem."

"Everything has been unlucky, Mr. Fregelius--or lucky," he added beneath his breath. "But you will like to know that she died singing it. The aerophone told me that."

"Mr. Monk," the old man said, catching his arm, "my daughter was a strange woman, a very strange woman, and since I heard this dreadful news I have been afraid that perhaps she was--unhappy. She was leaving her home, on your account--yes, on your account, it's no use pretending otherwise, although no one ever told me so--and--that she knew the church was going to be washed away."

"She thought you might think so," answered Morris, and he gave him Stella's last message. Moreover, he told him more of the real circumstances than he revealed to anybody else. He told him what nobody else ever knew, for on that lonely coast none had seen him enter or leave the place, how he had met her in the church--about the removal of the instruments, as he left it to be inferred--and at her wish had come home alone because of the gossip which had arisen. He explained also that according to her own story, from some unexplained cause she had fallen asleep in the church after his departure, and awakened to find herself surrounded by the waters with all hope gone.

"And now she is dead, now she is dead," groaned Mr. Fregelius, "and I am alone in the world."

"I am sorry for you," said Morris simply, "but there it is. It is no use looking backward, we must look forward."

"Yes, look forward, both of us, since she is hidden from both. You see, almost from the first I knew you were fond of her," added the clergyman simply.

"Yes," he answered, "I am fond of her, though of that the less said the better, and because our case is the same I hope that we shall always be friends."

"You are very kind; I shall need a friend now. I am alone now, quite alone, and my heart is broken."

Here it may be added that Morris was even better than his word. Out of the wealth that came to him in such plenty, for instance, he was careful to augment the old man's resources without offending his feelings, by adding permanently and largely to the endowment of the living. Also, he attended to his wants in many other ways which need not be enumerated, and not least by constantly visiting him. Many were the odd hours and the evenings that shall be told of later, which they spent together smoking their pipes in the Rectory study, and talking of her who had

gone, and whose lost life was the strongest link between them. Otherwise and elsewhere, except upon a few extraordinary occasions, her name rarely passed the lips of Morris.

Yet within himself he mourned and mourned, although even in the first bitterness not as one without hope. He knew that she had spoken truth; that she was not dead, but only for a while out of his sight and hearing.

Ten days had passed, and for Morris ten weary, almost sleepless, nights. The tragedy of the destruction of the new rector's daughter in the ruins of the Dead Church no longer occupied the tongues of men and paragraphs in papers. One day the sea gave up the hood of her brown ulster, the same that Morris had been seen arranging by Stephen and Eliza Layard; it was found upon the beach. After this even the local police admitted that the conjectures as to her end must be true, and, since for the lack of anything to hold it on there could be no inquest, the excitement dwindled and died. Nor indeed, as her father announced that he was quite satisfied as to the circumstances of his daughter's death, was any formal inquiry held concerning them. A few people, however, still believed that she was not really drowned but had gone away secretly for unknown private reasons. The world remembers few people, even if they be distinguished, for ten whole days. It has not time for such long-continued recollection of the dead, this world of the living who

hurry on to join them.

If this is the case with the illustrious, the wealthy and the powerful, how much more must it be so in the instance of an almost unknown girl, a stranger in the land? Morris and her father remembered her, for she was part of their lives and lived on with their lives. Stephen Layard mourned for the woman whom he had wished to marry--fiercely at first, with the sharp pain of disappointed passion; then intermittently; and at last, after he was comfortably wedded to somebody else, with a mild and sentimental regret three or four times a year. Eliza, too, when once convinced that she was "really dead," was "much shocked," and talked vaguely of the judgments and dispensations of Providence, as though this victim were pre-eminently deserving of its most stern decrees. It was rumoured, however, among the observant that her Christian sorrow was, perhaps, tempered by a secret relief at the absence of a rival, who, as she now admitted, sang extremely well and had beautiful eyes.

The Colonel also thought of the guest whom the sea had given and taken away, and with a real regret, for this girl's force, talents, and loveliness had touched and impressed him who had sufficient intellect and experience to know that she was a person cast in a rare and noble mould. But to Morris he never mentioned her name. No further confidence had passed between them on the matter. Yet he knew that to his son this name was holy. Therefore, being in some ways a wise man, he thought it well to keep his lips shut and to let the dead bury their dead.

By all the rest Stella Fregelius was soon as much forgotten as though she had never walked the world or breathed its air. That gale had done much damage and taken away many lives--all down the coast was heard the voice of mourning; hers chanced to be one of them, and there was nothing to be said.

On the morning of the eleventh day came a telegram from Mary addressed to Morris, and dated from London. It was brief and to the point. "Come to dinner with me at Seaview, and bring your father.--Mary."

When Morris drove to Seaview that evening he was as a man is in a dream. Sorrow had done its work on him, agonising his nerves, till at length they seemed to be blunted as with a very excess of pain, much as the nerves of the victims of the Inquisition were sometimes blunted, till at length they could scarcely feel the pincers bite or the irons burn. Always abstemious, also, for this last twelve days he had scarcely swallowed enough food to support him, with the result that his body weakened and suffered with his mind.

Then there was a third trouble to contend with,--the dull and gnawing sense of shame which seemed to eat into his heart. In actual fact, he had been faithful enough to Mary, but in mind he was most unfaithful. How could he come to her, the woman who was to be his wife, the woman who had dealt so well by him, with the memory of that spiritual marriage



at the altar of the Dead Church still burning in his brain--that marriage which now was consecrated and immortalised by death? What had he to give her that was worth her taking? he, who if the truth were known, shrank from all idea of union with any earthly woman; who longed only to be allowed to live out his time in a solitude as complete as he could find or fashion? It was monstrous; it was shameful; and then and there he determined that before ever he stood in Monksland church by the side of Mary Porson, at least he would tell her the truth, and give her leave to choose. To his other sins against her deceit should not be added.

"Might I suggest, Morris," said the Colonel, who as they drove, had been watching his son's face furtively by the light of the brougham lamp--"might I suggest that, under all the circumstances, Mary would perhaps appreciate an air a little less reminiscent of funerals? You may recollect that several months have passed since you parted."

"Yes," said Morris, "and a great deal has happened in that time."

"Of course, her father is dead." The Colonel alluded to no other death. "Poor Porson! How painfully that beastly window in the dining-room will remind me of him! Come, here we are; pull yourself together, old fellow."

Morris obeyed as best he could, and presently found himself following the Colonel into the drawing-room, for once in his life, as he

reflected, heartily glad to have the advantage of his parent's society. He could scarcely be expected to be very demonstrative and lover-like under the fire of that observant eyeglass.

As they entered the drawing-room by one door, Mary, looking very handsome and imposing in a low black dress, which became her fair beauty admirably, appeared at the other. Catching sight of Morris, she ran, or rather glided, forward with the graceful gait that was one of her distinctions, and caught him by both hands, bending her face towards him in open and unmistakable invitation.

In a moment it was over somehow, and she was saying:

"Morris, how thin you look, and there are great black lines under your eyes! Uncle, what have you been doing to him?"

"When I have had the pleasure of saying, How-do-you-do to you, my dear," he replied in a somewhat offended voice--for the Colonel was not fond of being overlooked, even in favour of an interesting son--"I shall be happy to do my best to answer your question."

"Oh! I am so sorry," she said, advancing her forehead to be kissed; "but we saw each other the other day, didn't we, and one can't embrace two people at once, and of course one must begin somewhere. But, why have you made him so thin?"

The Colonel surveyed Morris critically with his eyeglass.

"Really, my dear Mary," he replied, "I am not responsible for the variations in my son's habit of body." Then, as Morris turned away irritably, he added in a stage whisper, "He's been a bit upset, poor fellow! He felt your father's death dreadfully."

Mary winced a little, then, recovering her vivacity, said:

"Well, at any rate, uncle, I am glad to see that nothing of the sort has affected your health; I never saw you looking better."

"Ah! my dear, as we grow older we learn resignation----"

"And how to look after ourselves," thought Mary.

At that moment dinner was announced, and she went in on Morris's arm, the Colonel gallantly insisting that it should be so. After this things progressed a good deal better. The first plunge was over, and the cool refreshing waters of Mary's conversation seemed to give back to Morris's system some of the tone that it had lost. Also, when he thought fit to use it, he had a strong will, and he thought fit this night. Lastly, like many a man in a quandary before him, he discovered the strange advantages of a scientific but liberal absorption of champagne. Mary noticed this as she noticed everything, and said presently with her eyes wide open:

"Might I ask, my dear, if you are--ill? You are eating next to nothing, and that's your fourth large glass of champagne--you who never drank more than two. Don't you remember how it used to vex my poor dad, because he said that it always meant half a bottle wasted, and a temptation to the cook?"

Morris laughed--he was able to laugh by now--and replied, as it happened, with perfect truth, that he had an awful toothache.

"Then everything is explained," said Mary. "Did you ever see me with a toothache? Well, I should advise you not, for it would be our last interview. I will paint it for you after dinner with pure carbolic acid; it's splendid, that is if you don't drop any on the patient's tongue."

Morris answered that he would stick to champagne. Then Mary began to narrate her experiences in the convent in a fashion so funny that the Colonel could scarcely control his laughter, and even Morris, toothache, heartache, and all, was genuinely amused.

"Imagine, my dear Morris," she said, "you know the time I get down to breakfast. Or perhaps you don't. It's one of those things which I have been careful to conceal from you, but you will one day, and I believe that over it our matrimonial happiness may be wrecked. Well, at what hour do you think I found myself expected to be up in that convent?"

"Seven," suggested Morris.

"At seven! At a quarter to five, if you please! At a quarter to five every morning did some wretched person come and ring a dinner-bell outside my door. And it was no use going to sleep again, not the least, for at half-past five two hideous old lay-sisters arrived with buckets of water--they have a perfect passion for cleanliness--and began to scrub out the cell whether you were in bed or whether you weren't."

Then she rattled on to other experiences, trivial enough in themselves, but so entertaining when touched and lightened with her native humour, that very soon the evening had worn itself pleasantly away without a single sad or untoward word.

"Good night, dear!" said Mary to Morris, who this time managed to embrace her with becoming warmth; "you will come and see me to-morrow, won't you--no, not in the morning. Remember I have been getting up at a quarter to five for a month, and I am trying to equalise matters; but after luncheon. Then we will sit before a good fire, and have a talk, for the weather is so delightfully bad that I am sure I shan't be forced to take exercise."

"Very well, at three o'clock," said Morris, when the Colonel, who had been reflecting to himself, broke in.

"Look here, my dear, you must be down to lunch, or if you are not you

ought to be; so, as I want to have a chat with you about some of your poor father's affairs, and am engaged for the rest of the day, I will come over then if you will allow me."

"Certainly, uncle, if you like; but wouldn't Morris do instead--as representing me, I mean?"

"Yes," he answered; "when you are married he will do perfectly well, but until that happy event I am afraid that I must take your personal opinion."

"Oh! very well," said Mary with a sigh; "I will expect you at a quarter past one."