CHAPTER XVIII

TWO EXPLANATIONS

Accordingly, at a quarter past one on the following day the Colonel arrived at Seaview, went in to lunch with Mary, and made himself very amusing and agreeable about the domestic complications of his old friend, Lady Rawlins and her objectionable husband, and other kindred topics. Then, adroitly enough, he changed the conversation to the subject of the great gale, and when he talked of it awhile, said suddenly:

"I suppose that you have heard of the dreadful thing that happened here?"

"What dreadful thing?" asked Mary. "I have heard nothing; you must remember that I have been in a convent where one does not see the English papers."

"The death of Stella Fregelius," said the Colonel sadly.

"What! the daughter of the new rector--the young lady whom Morris took off the wreck, and whom I have been longing to ask him about, only I forgot last night? Do you mean to say that she is dead?"

"Dead as the sea can make her. She was in the old church yonder when

it was swept away, and now lies beneath its ruins in four fathoms of water."

"How awful!" said Mary. "Tell me about it; how did it happen?"

"Well, through Morris, poor fellow, so far as I can make out, and that is why he is so dreadfully cut up. You see she helped him to carry on his experiments with that machine, she sitting in the church and he at home in the Abbey, with a couple of miles of coast and water between them. Well, you are a woman of the world, my dear, and you must know that all this sort of thing means a great deal more intimacy than is desirable. How far that intimacy went I do not know, and I do not care to inquire, though for my part I believe that it was a very little way indeed. Still, Eliza Layard got hold of some cock and bull tale, and you can guess the rest."

"Perfectly," said Mary in a quiet voice, "if Eliza was concerned in it; but please go on with the story."

"Well, the gossip came to my ears----"

"Through Eliza?" queried Mary.

"Through Eliza--who said----" and he told her about the incident of the ulster and the dog-cart, adding that he believed it to be entirely untrue.

As Mary made no comment he went on: "I forgot to say that Miss Fregelius seems to have refused to marry Stephen Layard, who fell violently in love with her, which, to my mind, accounts for some of this gossip. Still, I thought it my duty, and the best thing I could do, to give a friendly hint to the old clergyman, Stella's father, a funny, withered-up old boy by the way. He seems to have spoken to his daughter rather indiscreetly, whereon she waylaid me as I was walking on the sands and informed me that she had made up her mind to leave this place for London, where she intended to earn her own living by singing and playing on the violin. I must tell you that she played splendidly, and, in my opinion, had one of the most glorious contralto voices that I ever heard."

"She seems to have been a very attractive young woman," said Mary, in the same quiet, contemplative voice.

"I think," went on the Colonel, "take her all in all, she was about the most attractive young woman that ever I saw, poor thing. Upon my word, dear, old as I am, I fell half in love with her myself, and so would you if you had seen those eyes of hers."

"I remember," broke in Mary, "that old Mr. Tomley, after he returned from inspecting the Northumberland living, spoke about Miss Fregelius's wonderful eyes--at the dinner-party, you know, on the night when Morris proposed to me," and she shivered a little as though she had turned

suddenly cold.

"Well, let me go on with my story. After she had told me this, and I had promised to help her with introductions--exactly why or how I forget--but I asked her flat out if she was in love with Morris. Thereon--I assure you, my dear Mary, it was the most painful scene in all my long experience--the poor thing turned white as a sheet, and would have fallen if I had not caught hold of her. When she came to herself a little, she admitted frankly that this was her case, but added--of which, of course, one may believe as much as one likes, that she had never known it until I asked the question."

"I think that quite possible," said Mary; "and really, uncle, to me your cross-examination seems to have been slightly indiscreet."

"Possibly, my dear, very possibly; even Solomon might be excused for occasionally making a mistake where the mysterious articles which young ladies call their hearts are concerned. I tell what happened, that is all. Shall I go on?"

"If you please."

"Well, after this she announced that she meant to see Morris once to say good-bye to him before she went to London, and left me. Practically the next thing I heard about her was that she was dead."

"Did she commit suicide?" asked Mary.

"It is said not; it is suggested that after Morris's interview with her in the Dead Church--for I gather there was an interview though nobody knows about it, and that's where they met--she fell asleep, which sounds an odd thing to do in the midst of such a gale as was raging on Christmas Eve, and so was overwhelmed. But who can say? Impressionable and unhappy women have done such deeds before now, especially if they imagine themselves to have become the object of gossip. Of course, also, the mere possibility of such a thing having happened on his account would be, and indeed has been, enough to drive a man like Morris crazy with grief and remorse."

"What had he to be remorseful for?" asked Mary. "If a young woman chanced to fall in love with him, why should he be blamed, or blame himself for that? After all, people's affections are in their own keeping."

"I imagine--very little, if anything. At least, I know this, that when I spoke to him about the matter after my talk with her, I gathered from what he said that there was absolutely nothing between them. To be quite frank, however, as I have tried to be with you, my dear, throughout this conversation, I also gathered that this young lady had produced a certain effect upon his mind, or at least that the knowledge that she had avowed herself to be attached to him--which I am afraid I let out, for I was in a great rage--produced some such effect. Well, afterwards

I believe, although I have asked no questions and am not sure of it, he went and said good-bye to her in this church, at her request. Then this dreadful tragedy happened, and there is an end of her and her story."

"Have you any object in telling it to me, uncle?"

"Yes, my dear, I have. I wished you to know the real facts before they reached you in whatever distorted version Morris's fancy or imagination, or exaggerated candour, may induce him to present them to you. Also, my dear, even if you find, or think you find that you have cause of complaint against him, I hope that you will see your way to being lenient and shutting your eyes a little."

"Severity was never my strong point," interrupted Mary.

"For this reason," went on the Colonel; "the young woman concerned was a very remarkable person; if you could have heard her sing, for instance, you would have said so yourself. It is a humiliating confession, but I doubt whether one young man out of a hundred, single, engaged, or married, could have resisted being attracted by her to just such an extent as she pleased, especially if he were flattered by the knowledge that she was genuinely attracted by himself."

Mary made no answer.

"Didn't you say you had some documents you wanted me to sign?" she asked

presently.

"Oh, yes; here is the thing," and he pulled a paper out of his pocket; "the lawyers write that it need not be witnessed."

Mary glanced at it. "Couldn't Morris have brought this?--he is your co-executor, isn't he?--and saved you the trouble?"

"Undoubtedly he could; but----"

"But what?"

"Well, if you want to know, my dear," said the Colonel, with a grave countenance, "just now Morris is in a state in which I do not care to leave more of this important business in his hands than is necessary."

"What am I to understand by that, uncle?" she said, looking at him shrewdly. "Do you mean that he is--not quite well?"

"Yes, Mary, I mean that--he is not quite well; that is, if my observation goes for anything. I mean," he went on with quiet vehemence, "I mean that--just at present, of course, he has been so upset by this miserable affair that for my part I wouldn't put any confidence in what he says about it, or about anything else. The thing has got upon his nerves and rendered him temporarily unfit for the business of ordinary life. You know that at the best of times he is a very peculiar man and

not quite like other people.

"Well, have you signed that? Thank you, my dear. By Jove! I must be off; I shall be late as it is. I may rely upon your discretion as to what we have been talking about, may I not? but I thought it as well to let you know how the land lay."

"Yes, uncle; and thank you for taking so much trouble."

When the door had closed behind him Mary reflected awhile. Then she said to herself:

"He thinks Morris is a little off his head, and has come here to warn me. I should not be surprised, and I daresay that he is right. Any way, a new trouble has risen up between us, the shadow of another woman, poor thing. Well, shadows melt, and the dead do not come back. She seems to have been very charming and clever, and I daresay that she fascinated him for a while, but with kindness and patience it will all come right. Only I do hope that he will not insist upon making me too many confidences."

So thought Mary, who by nature was forgiving, gentle, and an optimist; not guessing how sorely her patience as an affianced wife, and her charity as a woman of the world, would be tried within the hour.

From all of which it will be seen that for once the diplomacy of the

Colonel had prospered somewhat beyond its deserts. The departed cannot explain or defend themselves, and Morris's possible indiscretions already stood discounted in the only quarter where they might do harm.

Half an hour later Mary, sitting beside the fire with her toes upon the grate and her face to the window, perceived Morris on the gravel drive, wearing a preoccupied and rather wretched air. She noted, moreover, that before he rang the bell he paused for a moment as though to shake himself together.

"Here you are at last," she said, cheerfully, as he bent down to kiss her, "seven whole minutes before your time, which is very nice of you. Now, sit down there and get warm, and we will have a good, long talk."

Morris obeyed. "My father has been lunching with you, has he not?" he said somewhat nervously.

"Yes, dear, and telling me all the news, and a sad budget it seems to be; about the dreadful disasters of the great gale and the death of that poor girl who was staying with you, Miss Fregelius."

At the mention of this name Morris's face contorted itself, as the face of a man might do who was seized with a sudden pang of sharp and unexpected agony.

"Mary," he said, in a hoarse and broken voice, "I have a confession to

make to you, and I must make it--about this dead woman, I mean. I will not sail under false colours; you must know all the truth, and then judge."

"Dear me," she answered; "this sounds dreadfully tragic. But I may as well tell you at once that I have already heard some gossip."

"I daresay; but you cannot have heard all the truth, for it was known only to me and her."

Now, do what she would to prevent it, her alarm showed itself in Mary's eyes.

"What am I to understand?" she said in a low voice--and she looked a question.

"Oh, no!" he answered with a faint smile; "nothing at all----"

"Not that you have been embracing her, for instance? That, I understand, is Eliza Layard's story."

"No, no; I never did such a thing in my life."

A little sigh of relief broke from Mary's lips. At the worst this was but an affair of sentiment.

"I think, dear" she said in her ordinary slow voice, "that you had better set out the trouble in your own words, with as few details as possible, or none at all. Such things are painful, are they not--especially where the dead are concerned?"

Morris bowed his head and began: "You know I found her on the ship, singing as she only could sing, and she was a very strange and beautiful woman--perhaps beautiful is not the word--"

"It will do," interrupted Mary; "at any rate, you thought her beautiful."

"Then afterwards we grew intimate, very intimate, without knowing it, almost--indeed, I am not sure that we should ever have known it had it not been for the mischief-making of Eliza Layard----"

"May she be rewarded," ejaculated Mary.

"Well, and after she--that is, Eliza Layard--had spoken to my father, he attacked Mr. Fregelius, his daughter, and myself, and it seems that she confessed to my father that she was--was----"

"In love with you--not altogether unnatural, perhaps, from my point of view; though, of course, she oughtn't to have been so."

"Yes, and said that she was going away and--on Christmas Eve we met

there in the Dead Church. Then somehow--for I had no intention of such a thing--all the truth came out, and I found that I was no longer master of myself, and--God forgive me! and you, Mary, forgive me, too--that I loved her also."

"And afterwards?" said Mary, moving her skirts a little.

"And afterwards--oh! it will sound strange to you--we made some kind of compact for the next world, a sort of spiritual marriage; I can call it nothing else. Then I shook hands with her and went away, and in a few hours she was dead--dead. But the compact stands, Mary; yes, that compact stands for ever."

"A compact of a spiritual marriage in a place where there is no marriage. Do you mean, Morris, that you wish this strange proceeding to destroy your physical and earthly engagement to myself?"

"No, no; nor did she wish it; she said so. But you must judge. I feel that I have done you a dreadful wrong, and I was determined that you should know the worst."

"That was very good of you," Mary said, reflectively, "for really there is no reason why you should have told me this peculiar story. Morris, you have been working pretty hard lately, have you not?"

"Yes," he replied, absently, "I suppose I have."

"Was this young lady what is called a mystic?"

"Perhaps. Danish people often are. At any rate, she saw things more clearly than most. I mean that the future was nearer to her mind; and in a sense, the past also."

"Indeed. You must have found her a congenial companion. I suppose that you talked a good deal of these things?"

"Sometimes we did."

"And discovered that your views were curiously alike? For when one mystic meets another mystic, and the other mystic has beautiful eyes and sings divinely, the spiritual marriage will follow almost as a matter of course. What else is to be expected? But I am glad that you were faithful to your principles, both of you, and clung fast to the ethereal side of things."

Morris writhed beneath this satire, but finding no convenient answer to it, made none.

"Do you remember, my dear?" went on Mary, "the conversation we had one day in your workshop before we were engaged--that's years ago, isn't it--about star-gazing considered as a fine art?"

"I remember something," he said.

"That I told you, for instance, that it might be better if you paid a little more attention to matters physical, lest otherwise you should go on praying for vision till you could see, and for power until you could create?"

Morris nodded.

"Well, and I think I said--didn't I? that if you insisted upon following these spiritual exercises, the result might be that they would return upon you in some concrete shape, and take possession of you, and lead you into company and surroundings which most of us think it wholesome to avoid."

"Yes, you said something like that."

"It wasn't a bad bit of prophecy, was it?" went on Mary, rubbing her chin reflectively, "and you see his Satanic Majesty knew very well how to bring about its fulfilment. Mystical, lovely, and a wonderful mistress of music, which you adore; really, one would think that the bait must have been specially selected."

Crushed though he was, Morris's temper began to rise beneath the lash of Mary's sarcasm. He knew, however, that it was her method of showing jealousy and displeasure, both of them perfectly natural, and did his

best to restrain himself.

"I do not quite understand you," he said. "Also, you are unjust to her."

"Not at all. I daresay that in herself she was what you think her, a perfect angel; indeed, the descriptions that I have heard from your father and yourself leave no doubt of it in my mind. But even angels have been put to bad purposes; perhaps their innocence makes it possible to take advantage of them----"

He opened his lips to speak, but she held up her hand and went on:

"You mustn't think me unsympathetic because I put things as they appear to my very mundane mind. Look here, Morris, it just comes to this: If this exceedingly attractive young lady had made love to you, or had induced you to make love to her, so that you ran away with her, or anything else, of course you would have behaved badly and cruelly to me, but at least your conduct would be natural, and to be explained. We all know that men do this kind of thing, and women too, for the matter of that, under the influence of passion--and are often very sorry for it afterwards. But she didn't do this; she took you on your weak side, which she understood thoroughly--probably because it was her own weak side--and out-Heroded Herod, or, rather, out-mysticised the mystic, finishing up with some spiritual marriage, which, if it is anything at all, is impious. What right have we to make bargains for the Beyond, about which we know nothing?"

"She did know something," said Morris, with a sullen conviction.

"You think she did because you were reduced to a state of mind in which, if she had told you that the sun goes round the earth, you would quite readily have believed her. My dearest Morris, that way madness lies. Perhaps you understand now what I have been driving at, and the best proof of the absurdity of the whole thing is that I, stupid as I am, from my intimate knowledge of your character since childhood, was able to predict that something of this sort would certainly happen to you. You will admit that is a little odd, won't you?"

"Yes, it's odd; or, perhaps, it shows that you have more of the inner sight than you know. But there were circumstances about the story which you would find difficult to explain."

"Not in the least. In your own answer lies the explanation--your tendency to twist things. I prophesy certain developments from my knowledge of your character, whereupon you at once credit me with second sight, which is absurd."

"I don't see the analogy," said Morris.

"Don't you? I do. All this soul business is just a love affair gone wrong. If circumstances had been a little different--if, for instance, there had been no Mary Porson--I doubt whether anybody would have heard

much about spiritual marriages. Somehow I think that things would have settled down into a more usual groove."

Morris did not attempt to answer. He felt that Mary held all the cards, and, not unnaturally, was in a mood to play them. Moreover, it was desecration to him to discuss Stella's most secret beliefs with any other woman, and especially with Mary. Their points of view were absolutely and radically different. The conflict was a conflict between the natural and the spiritual law; or, in other words, between hard, brutal facts and theories as impalpable as the perfume of a flower, or the sound waves that stirred his aerophone. Moreover, he could see clearly that Mary's interpretation of this story was simple; namely, that he had fallen into temptation, and that the shock of his parting from the lady concerned, followed by her sudden and violent death, had bred illusions in his mind. In short, that he was slightly crazy; therefore, to be well scolded, pitied, and looked after rather than sincerely blamed. The position was scarcely heroic, or one that any man would choose to fill; still, he felt that it had its conveniences; that, at any rate, it must be accepted.

"All these questions are very much a matter of opinion," he said; then added, unconsciously reflecting one of Stella's sayings, "and I daresay that the truth is for each of us exactly what each of us imagines it to be."

"I was always taught that the truth is the truth, quite irrespective of

our vague and often silly imaginings; the difficulty being to find out exactly what it is."

"Perhaps," answered Morris, declining argument which is always useless between people are are determined not to sympathise with each other's views. "I knew that you would think my story foolish. I should never have troubled you with it, had I not felt it to be my duty, for naturally the telling of such a tale puts a man in a ridiculous light."

"I don't think you ridiculous, Morris; I think that you are suffering slightly from shock, that is all. What I say is that I detest all this spiritual hocus-pocus to which you have always had a leaning. I fear and hate it instinctively, as some people hate cats, because I know that it breeds mischief, and that, as I said before, people who go on trying to see, do see, or fancy that they do. While we are in the world let the world and its limitations be enough for us. When we go out of the world, then the supernatural may become the natural, and cease to be hurtful and alarming."

"Yes," said Morris, "those are very good rules. Well, Mary, I have told you the history of this sad adventure of which the book is now closed by death, and I can only say that I am humiliated. If anybody had said to me six months ago that I should have to come to you with such a confession, I should have answered that he was a liar. But now you see----"

"Yes," repeated Mary, "I see."

"Then will you give me your answer? For you must judge; I have told you that you must judge."

"Judge not, that ye be not judged," answered Mary. "Who am I that I should pass sentence on your failings? Goodness knows that I have plenty of my own; if you don't believe me, go and ask the nuns at that convent. Whatever were the rights and wrongs of it, the thing is finished and done with, and nobody can be more sorry for that unfortunate girl than I am. Also I think that you have behaved very well in coming to tell me about your trouble; but then that is like you, Morris, for you couldn't be deceitful, however hard you might try.

"So, dear, with your leave, we will say no more about Stella Fregelius and her spiritual views. When I engaged myself to you, as I told you at the time, I did so with my eyes open, for better or for worse, and unless you tell me right out that you don't want me, I have no intention of changing my mind, especially as you need looking after, and are not likely to come across another Stella.

"There, I haven't talked so much for months; I am quite tired, and wish to forget about all these disagreeables. I am afraid I have spoken sharply, but if so you must make allowances, for such stories are apt to sour the sweetest-tempered women--for half an hour. If I have seemed bitter and cross, dear, it is because I love you better than any

creature in the world, and can't bear to think----So you must forgive me. Do you, Morris?"

"Forgive! I forgive!" he stammered overwhelmed.

"There," she said again, very softly, stretching out her arms, "come and give me a kiss, and let us change the subject once and for ever. I want to tell you about my poor father; he left some messages for you, Morris."