CHAPTER XIX

MORRIS, THE MARRIED MAN

More than three years had gone by. Within twelve weeks of the date of the conversation recorded in the last chapter Morris and Mary were married in Monksland church. Although the wedding was what is called "quiet" on account of the recent death of the bride's father, the Colonel, who gave her away, was careful that it should be distinguished by a certain stamp of modest dignity, which he considered to be fitting to the station and fortune of the parties. To him, indeed, this union was the cause of heartfelt and earnest rejoicings, which is not strange, seeing that it meant nothing less than a new lease of life to an ancient family that was on the verge of disappearance. Had Morris not married the race would have become extinct, at any rate in the direct line; and had he married where there was no money, it might, as his father thought, become bankrupt, which in his view was almost worse.

The one terror which had haunted the Colonel for years like a persistent nightmare was that a day seemed to be at hand when the Monks would be driven from Monksland, where, from sire to son, they had sat for so many generations. That day had nearly come when he was a young man; indeed, it was only averted by his marriage with the somewhat humbly born Miss Porson, who brought with her sufficient dowry to enable him to pay off the major portion of the mortgages which then crippled the estate. But at that time agriculture flourished, and the rents from the property

were considerable; moreover, the Colonel was never of a frugal turn of mind. So it came about that every farthing was spent.

Afterwards followed a period of falling revenues and unlet farms. But still the expenses went on, with the result, as the reader knows, that at the opening of this history things were worse than they had ever been, and indeed, without the help received from Mr. Porson, must ere that have reached their natural end. Now the marriage of his son with a wealthy heiress set a period to all such anxiety, and unless the couple should be disappointed of issue, made it as certain as anything can be in this mutable world, that for some generations to come, at any rate, the name of Monk of Monksland would still appear in the handbooks of county families.

In the event these fears proved to be groundless, since by an unexpected turn of the wheel of chance Morris became a rich man in reward of his own exertions, and was thus made quite independent of his wife's large fortune. This, however, was a circumstance which the Colonel could not be expected to foresee, for how could he believe that an electrical invention which he looked upon as a mere scientific toy would ultimately bring its author not only fame, but an income of many thousands per annum? Yet this happened.

Other things happened also which, under the circumstances, were quite as satisfactory, seeing that within two years of his marriage Morris was the father of a son and daughter, so that the old Abbey, where, by the

especial request of the Colonel, they had established themselves, once more echoed to the voices of little children.

In those days, if anyone among his acquaintances had been asked to point out an individual as prosperous and happy as, under the most favoured circumstances, it is given to a mortal to be, he would unhesitatingly have named Morris Monk.

What was there lacking to this man? He had lineage that in his own neighbourhood gave him standing better than that of many an upstart baronet or knight, and with it health and wealth. He had a wife who was acknowledged universally to be one of the most beautiful, charming, and witty women in the county, whose devotion to himself was so marked and open that it became a public jest; who had, moreover, presented him with healthy and promising offspring. In addition to all these good things he had suddenly become in his own line one of the most famous persons in the world, so that, wherever civilized man was to be found, there his name was known as "Monk, who invented that marvellous machine, the aerophone." Lastly, there was no more need for him, as for most of us, to stagger down his road beneath a never lessening burden of daily labour. His work was done; a great conception completed after half a score of years of toil and experiment had crowned it with unquestionable success. Now he could sit at ease and watch the struggles of others less fortunate.

There are, however, few men on the right side of sixty whose souls grow healthier in idleness. Although nature often recoils from it, man was made to work, and he who will not work calls down upon himself some curse, visible or invisible, as he who works, although the toil seem wasted, wakes up one day to find the arid wilderness where he wanders strown with a manna of blessing. This should be the prayer of all of understanding, that whatever else it may please Heaven to take away, there may be left to them the power and the will to work, through disappointment, through rebuffs, through utter failure even, still to work. Many things for which they are or are not wholly responsible are counted to men as sins. Surely, however, few will press more heavily upon the beam of the balance, when at length we are commanded to unfold the talents which we have been given and earned, than those fateful words: "Lord, mine lies buried in its napkin," or worse still: "Lord, I have spent mine on the idle pleasures which my body loved."

Therefore it was not to the true welfare of Morris when through lack of further ambition, or rather of the sting of that spur of necessity which drives most men on, he rested upon his oars, and in practice abandoned his labours, drifting down the tide. No man of high intelligence and acquisitive brain can toil arduously for a period of years and suddenly cease from troubling to find himself, as he expects, at rest. For then into the swept and garnished chambers of that empty mind enter seven or more blue devils. Depression marks him for its own; melancholy forebodings haunt him; remorse for past misdeeds long repented of is

his daily companion. With these Erinnyes, more felt perhaps than any of them, comes the devastating sense that he is thwarting the best instinct of his own nature and the divine command to labour while there is still light, because the night draws on apace in which no man can labour.

Mary was fond of society, in which she liked to be accompanied by her husband, so Morris, whose one great anxiety was to please his wife and fall in with her every wish, went to a great many parties which he hated. Mary liked change also, so it came about that three months in the season were spent in London, where they had purchased a house in Green Street that was much frequented by the Colonel, and another two, or sometimes three, months at the villa on the Riviera, which Mary was very fond of on account of its associations with her parents.

Also in the summer and shooting seasons, when they were at home, the old Abbey was kept full of guests; for we may be sure that people so rich and distinguished did not lack for friends, and Mary made the very best of hostesses.

Thus it happened that except at the seasons when his wife retired under the pressure of domestic occurrences, Morris found that he had but little time left in which to be quiet; that his life in short was no longer the life of a worker, but that of a commonplace country gentleman of wealth and fashion.

Now it was Mary who had brought these things about, and by design; for

she was not a woman to act without reasons and an object. It is true that she liked a gay and pleasant life, for gaiety and pleasure were agreeable to her easy and somewhat indolent mind, also they gave her opportunities of exercising her faculties of observation, which were considerable.

But Mary was far fonder of her husband than of those and other vanities; indeed, her affection for him shone the guiding star of her existence. From her childhood she had been devoted to this cousin, who, since her earliest days, had been her playmate, and at heart had wished to marry him, and no one else. Then he began his experiments, and drifted quite away from her. Afterwards things changed, and they became engaged. Again the experiments were carried on, with the aid of another woman, and again he drifted away from her; also the drifting in this instance was attended by serious and painful complications.

Now the complications had ceased to exist; they threatened her happiness no more. Indeed, had they been much worse than they were she would have overlooked them, being altogether convinced of the truth of the old adage which points out the folly of cutting off one's nose to spite one's face. Whatever his failings or shortcomings, Morris was her joy, the human being in whose company she delighted; without whom, indeed, her life would be flat, stale, and unprofitable. The stronger then was her determination that he should not slip back into his former courses; those courses which in the end had always brought about estrangement from herself.

Inventions, the details of which she could not understand, meant, as she knew well, long days and weeks of solitary brooding; therefore inventions, and, indeed, all unnecessary work, were in his case to be discouraged. Such solitary brooding also drew from the mind of Morris a vague mist of thought about matters esoteric which, to Mary's belief, had the properties of a miasma that crept like poison through his being. She wished for no more star-gazing, no more mysticism, and, above all, no more memories of the interloping woman who, in his company, had studied its doubtful and dangerous delights.

Although since the day of Morris's confession Mary had never even mentioned the name of Stella to him, she by no means forgot that such a person once existed. Indeed, carelessly and without seeming to be anxious on the subject, she informed herself about her down to the last possible detail; so that within a few months of the death of Miss Fregelius she knew, as she thought, everything that could be known of her life at Monksland. Moreover, she saw three different pictures of her: one a somewhat prim photograph which Mr. Fregelius, her father, possessed, taken when she was about twenty; another, a coloured drawing made by Morris--who was rather clever at catching likenesses--of her as she appeared singing in the chapel on the night when she had drawn the page-boy, Thomas, from his slumbers; and the third, also a photograph, taken by some local amateur, of her and Morris standing together on the beach and engaged evidently in eager discussion.

From these three pictures, and especially from Morris's sketch, which showed the spiritual light shining in her eyes, and her face rapt, as it were, in a very ecstasy of music, Mary was able to fashion with some certainty the likeness of the living woman. The more she studied this the more she found it formidable, and the more she understood how it came about that her husband had fallen into folly. Also, she learned to understand that there might be greater weight and meaning in his confession than she had been inclined to allow to it at the time; that, at any rate, its extravagances ought not to be set down entirely, as her father-in-law had suggested with such extreme cleverness, to the vagaries of a mind suffering from sudden shock and alarm.

All these conclusions made Mary anxious, by wrapping her husband round with common domestic cares and a web of daily, social incident, to bury the memory of this Stella beneath ever-thickening strata of forgetfulness; not that in themselves these reminiscences, however hallowed, could do her any further actual harm; but because the train of thought evoked thereby was, as she conceived, morbid, and dangerous to the balance of his mind.

The plan seemed wise and good, and, in the case of most men, probably would have succeeded. Yet in Morris's instance from the commencement it was a failure. She had begun by making his story and ideas, absurd enough on the face of them, an object of somewhat acute sarcasm, if not of ridicule. This was a mistake, since thereby she caused him to suppress every outward evidence of them; to lock them away in the most

secret recesses of his heart. If the lid of a caldron full of fluid is screwed down while a fire continues to burn beneath it, the steam which otherwise would have passed away harmlessly, gathers and struggles till the moment of inevitable catastrophe. The fact that for a while the caldron remains inert and the steam invisible is no indication of safety. To attain safety in such a case either the fire must be raked out or the fluid tapped. Mary had screwed down the lid of her domestic caldron, but the flame still burned beneath, and the water still boiled within.

This was her first error, and the second proved almost as mischievous. She thought to divert Morris from a central idea by a multitude of petty counter-attractions; she believed that by stopping him from the scientific labours and esoteric speculation connected with this idea, that it would be deadened and in time obliterated.

As a matter of fact, by thus emptying his mind of its serious and accustomed occupations, Mary made room for the very development she dreaded to flourish like an upas tree. For although he breathed no word of it, although he showed no sign of it, to Morris the memory of the dead was a constant companion. Time heals all things, that is the common saying; but would it be possible to formulate any fallacy more complete? There are many wounds that time does not heal, and often enough against the dead it has no power at all--for how can time compete against the eternity of which they have become a part? The love of them where they have been truly loved, remains quite unaltered; in some instances,

indeed, it is emdued with a power of terrible and amazing growth.

On earth, very probably, that deep affection would have become subject to the natural influences of weakening and decay; and, in the instance of a man and woman, the soul-possessing passion might have passed, to be replaced by a more moderate, custom-worn affection. But the dead are beyond the reach of those mouldering fingers. There they stand, perfect and unalterable, with arms which never cease from beckoning, with a smile that never grows less sweet. Come storm, come shine, nothing can tarnish the pure and gleaming robes in which our vision clothes them. We know the worst of them; their faults and failings cannot vex us afresh, their errors are all forgiven. It is their best part only that remains unrealised and unread, their purest aspirations which we follow with leaden wings, their deepest thoughts that we still strive to plumb with the short line of our imagination or experience, and to weigh in our imperfect balances.

Yes, there they stand, and smile, and beckon, while ever more radiant grow their brows, and more to be desired the knowledge of their perfect majesty. There is no human passion like this passion for the dead; none so awful, none so holy, none so changeless. For they have become eternal, and our desire for them is sealed with the stamp of their eternity, and strengthens in the shadow of its wings till the shadows flee away and we pass to greet them in the dawn of the immortal morning.

Yes, within the secret breast of Morris the flame of memory still

burned, and still seethed those bitter waters of desire for the dead. There was nothing carnal about this desire, since the passions of the flesh perish with the flesh. Nor was there anything of what a man may feel when he sees the woman whom he loves and who loves him, forced to another fate, for to those he robs death has this advantage over the case of other successful rivals: his embrace purifies, and of it we are not jealous. The longing was spiritual, and for this reason it did not weaken, but, indeed, became a part of him, to grow with the spirit from which it took its birth. Still, had it not been for a chance occurrence, there, in the spirit, it might have remained buried, in due course to pass away with it and seek its expression in unknown conditions and regions unexplored.

In a certain fashion Morris was happy enough. He was very fond of his wife, and he adored his little children as men of tender nature do adore those that are helpless, and for whose existence they are responsible. He appreciated his public reputation, his wealth, and the luxury that lapped him round, and above all he was glad to have been the means of restoring, and, indeed, of advancing the fortunes of his family.

Moreover, as has been said, above all things he desired to please Mary, the lovely, amiable woman who had complimented him with her unvarying affection; and--when he went astray--who, with scarcely a reproach, had led him back into its gentle fold. Least of all, therefore, was it his will to flaunt before her eyes the spectre from a past which she wished to forget, or even to let her guess that such a past still permeated

his present. Therefore, on this subject settled the silence of the dead, till at length Mary, observant as she was, became well-nigh convinced that Stella Fregelius was forgotten, and that her fantastic promises were disproved. Yet no mistake could have been more profound.

It was Morris's habit, whenever he could secure an evening to himself, which was not very often, to walk to the Rectory and smoke his pipe in the company of Mr. Fregelius. Had Mary chanced to be invisibly present, or to peruse a stenographic report of what passed at one of these evening calls--whereof, for reasons which she suppressed, she did not entirely approve--she might have found sufficient cause to vary her opinion. On these occasions ostensibly Morris went to talk about parish affairs, and, indeed, to a certain extent he did talk about them. For instance, Stella who had been so fond of music, once described to him the organ which she would like to have in the fine old parish church of Monksland. Now that renovated instrument stood there, and was the admiration of the country-side, as it well might be in view of the fact that it had cost over four thousand pounds.

Again, Mr. Fregelius wished to erect a monument to his daughter, which, as her body never had been found, could properly be placed in the chancel of the church. Morris entered heartily into the idea and undertook to spend the hundred pounds which the old gentleman had saved for this purpose on his account and to the best advantage. In affect he did spend it to excellent advantage, as Mr. Fregelius admitted when the monument arrived.

It was a lovely thing, executed by one of the first sculptors of the day, in white marble upon a black stone bed, and represented the mortal shape of Stella. There she lay to the very life, wrapped in a white robe, portrayed as a sleeper awakening from the last sleep of death, her eyes wide and wondering, and on her face that rapt look which Morris had caught in his sketch of her, singing in the chapel. At the edge of the base of this remarkable effigy, set flush on the black marble in letters of plain copper was her name--Stella Fregelius--with the date of her death. On one side appeared the text that she had quoted, "O death, where is thy sting?" and on the other its continuation, "O grave, where is thy victory?" and at the foot part of a verse from the forty-second psalm: "Deep calleth unto deep. . . . All Thy waves and storms have gone over me."

Like the organ, this monument, which stood in the chancel, was much admired by everybody, except Mary, who found it rather theatrical; and, indeed, when nobody was looking, surveyed it with a gloomy and a doubtful eye.

That Morris had something to do with the thing she was quite certain, since she knew well that Mr. Fregelius would never have invented any memorial so beautiful and full of symbolism; also she doubted his ability to pay for a piece of statuary which must have cost many hundreds of pounds. A third reason, which seemed to her conclusive, was that the face on the statue was the very face of Morris's drawing,

although, of course, it was possible that Mr. Fregelius might have borrowed the sketch for the use of the sculptor. But of all this, although it disturbed her, occurring as it did just when she hoped that Stella was beginning to be forgotten, she spoke not a word to Morris. "Least said, soonest mended," is a good if a homely motto, or so thought Mary.

The monument had been in place a year, but whenever he was at home Morris's visits to Mr. Fregelius did not grow fewer. Indeed, his wife noticed that, if anything, they increased in number, which, as the organ was now finished down to the last allegorical carvings of its case, seemed remarkable and unnecessary. Of course, the fact was that on these occasions the conversation invariably centred on one subject, and that subject, Stella. Considered in certain aspects, it must have been a piteous thing to see and hear these two men, each of them bereaved of one who to them above all others had been the nearest and dearest, trying to assuage their grief by mutual consolations. Morris had never told Mr. Fregelius all the depth of his attachment to his daughter, at least, not in actual, unmistakable words, although, as has been said, from the first her father took it for granted, and Morris, tacitly at any rate, had accepted the conclusion. Indeed, very soon he found that no other subject had such charms for his guest; that of Stella he might talk for ever without the least fear that Morris would be weary.

So the poor, childless, unfriended old man put aside the reserve and timidity which clothed him like a garment, and talked on into those

sympathetic ears, knowing well, however--for the freemasonry of their common love taught it to him--that in the presence of a third person her name, no allusion to her, even, must pass his lips. In short, these conversations grew at length into a kind of seance or solemn rite; a joint offering to the dead of the best that they had to give, their tenderest thoughts and memories, made in solemn secrecy and with uplifted hearts and minds.

Mr. Fregelius was an historian, and possessed some interesting records, upon which it was his habit to descant. Amongst other things he instructed Morris in the annals of Stella's ancestry upon both sides, which, as it happened, could be traced back for many generations. In these discourses it grew plain to his listener whence had sprung certain of her qualities, such as her fearless attitude towards death, and her tendency towards mysticism. Here in these musty chronicles, far back in the times when those of whom they kept record were half, if not wholly, heathen, these same qualities could be discovered among her forbears.

Indeed, there was one woman of whom the saga told, a certain ancestress named Saevuna, whereof it is written "that she was of all women the very fairest, and that she drew the hearts of men with her wonderful eyes as the moon draws mists from a marsh," who, in some ways, might have been Stella herself, Stella unchristianized and savage.

This Saevuna's husband rebelled against the king of his country, and, being captured, was doomed to a shameful death by hanging as a traitor.

Thereon, under pretence of bidding him farewell, she administered poison to him, partaking of the same herself; "and," continues the saga, "they both of them, until their pains overcame them, died singing a certain ancient song which had descended in the family of one of them, and is called the Song of the Over-Lord, or the Offering to Death. This song, while strength and voice remained to them, it is the duty of this family to say or sing, or so they hold it, in the hour of their death. But if they sing it, except by way of learning its words and music from their mothers, and escape death, it will not be for very long, seeing that when once the offering is laid upon his altar, the Over-Lord considers it his own, and, after the fashion of gods and men, takes it as soon as he can. So sweet and strange was the singing of this Saevuna until she choked that the king and his nobles came out to hear it, and all men thought it a great marvel that a woman should sing thus in the very pains of death. Moreover, they declared, many of them, that while the song went on they could think of nothing else, and that strange and wonderful visions passed before their eyes. But of this nobody can know the truth for certain, as the woman and her husband died long ago."

"You see," said Mr. Fregelius, when he had finished translating the passage aloud, "it is not wonderful that I thought it unlucky when I heard that you had found Stella singing this same song upon the ship, much as centuries ago her ancestress, Saevuna, sang it while she and her husband died."

"At any rate, the omen fulfilled itself," answered Morris, with a sigh,

"and she, too, died with the song upon her lips, though I do not think that it had anything to do with these things, which were fated to befall."

"Well," said the clergyman, "the fate is fulfilled now, and the song will never be sung again. She was the last of her race, and it was a law among them that neither words nor music should ever be written down."

When such old tales and legends were exhausted, and, outside the immediate object of their search, some of them were of great interest to a man who, like Morris, had knowledge of Norse literature, and was delighted to discover in Mr. Fregelius a scholar acquainted with the original tongues in which they were written, these companions fell back upon other matters. But all of them had to do with Stella. One night the clergyman read some letters written by her as a child from Denmark. On another he produced certain dolls which she had dressed at the same period of her life in the costume of the peasants of that country. On a third he repeated a piece of rather indifferent poetry composed by her when she was a girl of sixteen. Its strange title was, "The Resurrection of Dead Roses." It told how in its author's fancy the flowers which were cut and cast away on earth bloomed again in heaven, never to wither more; a pretty allegory, but treated in a childish fashion.

Thus, then, from time to time, as occasion offered, did this strange pair celebrate the rites they thought so harmless, and upon the altar of memory make offerings to their dead.