

CHAPTER XX

STELLA'S DIARY

It seems to be a law of life that nothing can stand completely still and changeless. All must vary, must progress or retrograde; the very rocks in the bowels of the earth undergo organic alterations, while the eternal hills that cover them increase or are worn away. Much more is this obvious in the case of ephemeral man, of his thoughts, his works, and everything wherewith he has to do, he who within the period of a few short years is doomed to appear, wax, wane, and vanish.

Even the conversations of Mr. Fregelius and Morris were subject to the working of this universal rule; and in obedience to it must travel towards a climax, either of fruition, however unexpected, or, their purpose served, whatever it may have been, to decay and death, for lack of food upon which to live and flourish. The tiniest groups of impulses or incidents have their goal as sure and as appointed as that of the cluster of vast globes which form a constellation. Between them the principal distinction seems to be one of size, and at present we are not in a position to say which may be the most important, the issue of the smallest of unrecorded causes, or of the travelling of the great worlds. The destiny of a single human soul shaped or directed by the one, for aught we know, may be of more weight and value than that of a multitude of hoary universes naked of life and spirit. Or perhaps to the Eye that sees and judges the difference is nothing.

Thus even these semi-secret interviews when two men met to talk over the details of a lost life with which, however profoundly it may have influenced them in the past, they appeared, so far as this world is concerned, to have nothing more to do, were destined to affect the future of one of them in a fashion that could scarcely have been foreseen. This became apparent, or put itself in the way of becoming apparent, when on a certain evening Morris found Mr. Fregelius seated in the rectory dining-room, and by his side a little pile of manuscript volumes bound in shabby cloth.

"What are those?" asked Morris. "Her translation of the Saga of the Cave Outlaws?"

"No, Morris," answered Mr. Fregelius--he called him Morris when they were alone--"of course not. Don't you remember that they were bound in red?" he added reproachfully, "and that we did them up to send to the publisher last week?"

"Yes, yes, of course; he wrote to me yesterday to say that he would be glad to bring out the book"--Morris did not add, "at my risk."--"But what are they?"

"They are," replied Mr. Fregelius, "her journals, which she appears to have kept ever since she was fourteen years of age. You remember she was going to London on the day that she was drowned--that Christmas Day?"

Well, before she went out to the old church she packed her belongings into two boxes, and there those boxes have lain for three years and more, because I could never find the heart to meddle with them. But, a few nights ago I wasn't able to sleep--I rest very badly now--so I went and undid them, lifting out all the things which her hands had put there. At the bottom of one of the boxes I found these volumes, except the last of them, in which she was writing till the day of her death. That was at the top. I was aware that she kept a diary, for I have seen her making the entries; but of its contents I knew nothing. In fact, until last night I had forgotten its existence."

"Have you read it now?" asked Morris.

"I have looked into it; it seems to be a history of her thoughts and theories. Facts are very briefly noted. It occurred to me that you might like to read it. Why not?"

"Yes, yes, very much," answered Morris eagerly. "That is, if you think she will not mind. You see, it is private."

Mr. Fregelius took no notice of the tense of which Morris made use, for the reason that it seemed natural to him that he should employ it. Their strange habit was to talk of Stella, not as we speak of one dead, but as a living individuality with whom they chanced for a while to be unable to communicate.

"I do not think that she will mind," he answered slowly; "quite the reverse, indeed. It is a record of a phase and period of her existence which, I believe, she might wish those who are--interested in her--to study, especially as she had no secrets that she could desire to conceal. From first to last I believe her life to have been as clear as the sky, and as pure as running water."

"Very well," answered Morris, "if I come across any passage that I think I ought not to read, I will skip."

"I can find nothing of the sort, or I would not give it to you," said Mr. Fregelius. "But, of course, I have not read the volumes through as yet. There has been no time for that. I have sampled them here and there, that is all."

That night Morris took those shabby note-books home with him. Mary, who according to her custom went to bed early, being by this time fast asleep, he retired to his laboratory in the old chapel, where it was his habit to sit, especially when, as at the present time, his father was away from home. Here, without wasting a moment, he began his study of them.

It was with very strange sensations, such as he had never before experienced, that he opened the first of the volumes, written some

thirteen years earlier, that is, about ten years before Stella's death. Their actual acquaintance had been but brief. Now he was about to complete his knowledge of her, to learn many things which he had found no time, or had forgotten to inquire into, to discover the explanation of various phases of her character hitherto but half-revealed; perhaps to trace to its source the energy of that real, but mystic, faith with which it was informed. This diary that had come--or perhaps been sent to him--in so unexpected a fashion, was the key whereby he hoped to open the most hidden chambers of the heart of the woman whom he loved, and who loved him with all her strength and soul.

Little wonder, then, that he trembled upon the threshold of such a search. He was like the neophyte of some veiled religion, who, after long years of arduous labour and painful preparation, is at length conducted to the doors of its holy of holies, and left to enter there alone. What will he find beyond them? The secret he longed to learn, the seal and confirmation of his hard-won faith, or empty, baulking nothingness? Would the goddess herself, the unveiled Isis, wait to bless her votary within those doors? Or would that hall be tenanted but by a painted and bedizened idol, a thing fine with ivory and gold, but dead and soulless?

Might it not be better indeed to turn back while there was yet time, to be content to dwell on in the wide outer courts of the imagination, where faith is always possible, rather than to hazard all? No; it would, Morris felt, be best to learn the whole truth, especially as he was sure

that it could not prove other than satisfying and beautiful. Blind must he have been indeed, and utterly without intuition if with every veil that was withdrawn from it the soul of Stella did not shine more bright.

Another question remained. Was it well that he should read these diaries? Was not his mind already full enough of Stella? If once he began to read, might it not be overladen? In short, Mary had dealt well by him; when those books were open in his hand, would he be dealing well by Mary? Answers--excellent answers--to these queries sprang up in his mind by dozens.

Stella was dead. "But you are sworn to her in death," commented the voice of Conscience. "Would you rob the living of your allegiance before the time?"

There was no possible harm in reading the records of the life and thoughts of a friend, or even of a love departed. "Yet," suggested the voice of Conscience, "are you so sure that this life is departed? Have you not at times felt its presence, that mysterious presence of the dead, so sweet, so heavy, and so unmistakable, with which at some time or other in their lives many have made acquaintance? Will not the study of this life cause that life to draw near? the absorption of those thoughts bring about the visits of other and greater thoughts, whereof they may have been, as it were, the seed?"

Anyone who knew its author would be interested to read this human

document, the product of an intelligence singularly bright and clear; of a vision whose point of outlook was one of the highest and most spiritual peaks in the range of our human imaginings. "Quite so," agreed the voice of Conscience. "For instance, Mary would be delighted. Why not begin with her? In fact, why not peruse these pages together--it would lead to some interesting arguments? Why pore over them in this selfish manner all alone and at the dead of night when no one can possibly disturb you, or, since you have blocked the hagioscope, even see you? And why does the door of that safe stand open? Because of the risk of fire if anyone should chance to come in with a candle, I suppose. No, of course it would not be right to leave such books about; especially as they do not belong to you."

Then enraged, or at least seriously irritated, by these impertinent comments of his inner self upon himself, Morris bade Conscience to be gone to its own place. Next, after contemplating it for a while as Eve might have contemplated the apple, unmindful of a certain petition in the Lord's Prayer, he took up the volume marked I, and began to read the well-remembered hand-writing with its quaint mediaeval-looking contractions. Even at the age when its author had opened her diary, he noted that this writing was so tiny and neat that many of the pages might have been taken from a monkish missal. Also there were few corrections; what she set down was already determined in her mind.

From that time forward Morris sat up even later than usual, nor did he waste those precious solitary hours. But the diary covered ten full

years of a woman's life, during all of which time certainly never a week passed without her making entries in it, some of them of considerable length. Thus it came about--for he skipped no word--that a full month had gone by before Morris closed the last volume and slipped it away into its hiding-place in the safe.

As Mr. Fregelius had said, the history was a history of thoughts and theories, rather than of facts, but notwithstanding this, perhaps on account of it, indeed, it was certainly a work which would have struck the severest and least interested critic as very remarkable. The prevailing note was that of vividness. What the writer had felt, what she had imagined, what she had desired, was all set out, frequently in but few words, with such crystal clearness, such incisive point, that it came home to the reader's thought as a flash of sudden light might come home to his eye. In a pre-eminent degree Stella possessed the gift of expression. Even her most abstruse self-communings and speculations were portrayed so sharply that their meaning could not possibly be mistaken. This it was that gave the book much of its value. Her thoughts were not vague, she could define them in her own consciousness, and, what is more rare, on paper.

So much for the form of the journal, its matter is not so easy to describe. At first, as might be expected from her years, it was somewhat childish in character, but not on that account the less sweet and fragrant of a child's poor heart. Here with stern accuracy were recorded her little faults of omission and commission--how she had answered

crossly; how she had not done her duty; varied occasionally with short poems, some copied, some of her own composition, and prayers also of her making, one or two of them very touching and beautiful. From time to time, too--indeed this habit clung to her to the last--she introduced into her diary descriptions of scenery, generally short and detached, but set there evidently because she wished to preserve a sketch in words of some sight that had moved her mind.

Here is a brief example describing a scene in Norway, where she was visiting, as it appeared to her upon some evening in late autumn: "This afternoon I went out to gather cranberries on the edge of the fir-belt below the Stead. Beneath me stretched the great moss-swamp, so wide that I could not discern its borders, and grey as the sea in winter. The wind blew and in the west the sun was setting, a big, red sun which glowed like the copper-covered cathedral dome that we saw last week. All about in the moss stood pools of black, stagnant water with little straggling bushes growing round them. Under the clouds they were ink, but in the path of the red light, there they were blood. A man with a large basket on his back and a long staff in his hand, was walking across the moss from west to east. The wind tossed his cloak and bent his grey beard as he threaded his way among the pools. The red light fell upon him also, and he looked as though he were on fire. Before him, gathering thicker as the sun sank, were shadows and blackness. He seemed to walk into the blackness like a man wading into the sea. It swallowed him up; he must have felt very lonely with no one near him in that immense grey place. Now he was all gone, except his head that wore a halo of the red light.

He looked like a saint struggling across the world into the Black Gates. For a minute he stood still, as though he were frightened. Then a sudden gust seemed to sweep him on again, right into the Gates, and I lost sight of that man whom I shall never see any more. I wonder whether he was a saint or a sinner, and what he will find beyond the Gates. A curlew flew past me, borne out of the darkness, and its cry made me feel sad and shiver. It might have been the man's soul which wished to look upon the light again. Then the sun sank, and there was no light, only the wind moaning, and far, far away the sad cry of the curlew."

This description was simple and unpolished as it was short. Yet it impressed the mind of Morris, and its curious allegorical note appealed to his imagination. The grey moss broken by stagnant pools, lonesome and primeval; the dreary pipe of the wildfowl, the red and angry sun fronting the gloom of advancing, oblivious night; the solitary traveller, wind-buffed, way-worn, aged, heavy-laden, fulfilling the last stage of his appointed journey to a realm of sleep and shadow. All these sprang into vision as he read, till the landscape, concentrated, and expressing itself in its tiny central point of human interest, grew more real in memory and meaning than many with which he was himself familiar.

Yet that description was written by an untrained girl not yet seventeen years of age. But with such from first to last, and this was by no means the best of them, he found her pages studded.

Then, jotted down from day to day, came the account of the illness and death of her twin sister, Gudrun, a pitiful tale to read. Hopes, prayers, agonies of despair, all were here recorded; the last scene also was set out with a plain and noble dignity, written by the bed of death in the presence of death. Now under the hand of suffering the child had become a woman, and, as was fitting, her full soul found relief in deeper notes. "Good-bye, Gudrun," she ended, "my heart is broken; but I will mourn for you no more. God has called you, and we give you back to God. Wait for me, my sister, for I am coming also, and I will not linger. I will walk quickly."

It was from this sad day of her only sister's death that the first real developments of the mystical side of Stella's character must be dated. The sudden vanishing in Gudrun in the bloom of youth and beauty brought home to her the lesson which all must learn, in such a fashion that henceforth her whole soul was tinged to its sad hue.

"Now I understand it all," she wrote after returning from the funeral. "We do not live to die, we die to live. As a grain of sand to the whole shore, as a drop of water to the whole sea, so is what we call our life to the real life. Of course one has always been taught that in church, but I never really comprehended it before. Henceforth this thought shall be a part of me! Every morning when I wake I will remember that I am one night nearer to the great dawn, every night when I lie down to sleep I will thank God that another day of waiting has ended with the sunset. Yes, and I will try to live so that after my last sunset I may meet the

end as did Gudrun; without a single doubt or fear, for if I have nothing to reproach myself with, why should I be reproached? If I have longed for light and lived towards the light, however imperfect I may be, why should I be allotted to the darkness?"

Almost on the next page appeared a prayer "For the welfare and greater glory" of her who was dead, and for the mourner who was left alive, with this quaint note appended: "My father would not approve of this, as it is against the rubric, but all the same I mean to go on praying for the dead. Why should I not? If my poor petitions cannot help them who are above the need for help, at least they may show that they are not forgotten. Oh! that must be the bitter part; to live on full of love and memory and watch forgetfulness creeping into the hearts of the loved and the remembered. The priests never thought of it, but there lies the real purgatory."

The diary showed it to be a little more than a year after this that spiritual doubts began to possess the soul of Stella. After all, was she not mistaken? Was there any world beyond the physical? Were we not mere accidents, born of the will or the chance of the flesh, and shaped by the pressure of centuries of circumstance? Were not all religions different forms of a gigantic fraud played by his own imagination upon blind, believing man? And so on to the end of the long list of those questions which are as old as thought.

"I look," she wrote under the influence of this mood, "but everywhere

is blackness; blackness without a single star. I cry aloud, but the only answer is the echo of my own voice beating back upon me from the deaf heavens. I pray for faith, yet faith fades and leaves me. I ask for signs, and there is no sign. The argument? So far as I have read and heard, it seems the other way. And yet I do not believe their proofs. I do not believe that so many generations of good men would have fed full upon a husk of lies and have lain down to sleep at last as though satisfied with meat. My heart rises at the thought. I am immortal. I know that I am immortal. I am a spirit. In days to come, unchained by matter, time, or space, I shall stand before the throne of the Father of all spirits, receiving of His wisdom and fulfilling His commandments. Yet, O God, help Thou my unbelief. O God, draw and deliver me from this abyss."

From this time forward here and there in the diary were to be found passages, or rather sentences, that Morris did not understand. They alluded to some secret and persistent effort which the writer had been making, and after one of them came these words, "I have failed again, but she was near me; I am sure that she was very near me."

Then at last came this entry, which, as the writing showed, was written with a shaking hand. "I have seen her beyond the possibility of a doubt. She appeared, and was with me quite a while; and, oh! the rapture! It has left me weak and faint after all that long, long preparation. It is of the casting forth of spirits that it is said, 'This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting,' but it is also true of the drawing of

them down. To see a spirit one must grow akin to spirits, which is not good for us who are still in the flesh. I am satisfied. I have seen, and I know. Now I shall call her back no more lest the thing should get the mastery of me, and I become unfitted for my work on earth. This morning I could scarcely hold the bow of the violin, and its sweetest notes sounded harsh to me; I heard discords among their harmonies. Also I had no voice to sing, and after all the money and time that have been spent upon them, I must keep up my playing and singing, since, perhaps, in the future if my father's health should fail, as it often threatens to do, they may be our only means of livelihood. NO, I shall try no more; I will stop while there is yet time, while I am still my own mistress and have the strength to deny me this awful joy. But I have seen! I have seen, and I am thankful, who shall never doubt again. Yet the world, and those who tread it, can never more be quite the same to me, and that is not wholesome. This is the price which must be paid for vision of that which we were not meant to touch, to taste, to handle."

After this, for some years--until it was decided, indeed, that they should move to Monksland--there was little of startling interest in the diary. It recorded descriptions of the wild moorland scenery, of birds, and ferns, and flowers. Also there were sketches of the peasantry and of the gentlefolk with whom the writer came in contact; very shrewd and clever, some of them, but with this peculiarity--that they were absolutely free from unkindness of thought or words, though sometimes their author allowed herself the license of a mitigated satire. Such things, with notes of domestic and parish matters, and of the progress

made in her arduous and continual study of vocal and instrumental music, made up the sum of these years of the diary. Then at length, at the beginning of the last volume, came this entry:

"The unexpected has happened, somebody has actually been found in whose eyes this cure of souls is desirable--namely, a certain Mr. Tomley, the rector of a village called Monksland, upon the East Coast of England. I will sum up the history of the thing. For some years I have been getting tired of this place, although, in a way, I love it too. It is so lonely here, and--I confess my weakness--playing and singing as I do now, I should like, occasionally, to have a better audience than a few old, half-deaf clergymen, their preoccupied and commonplace wives, some yeomen farmers, and a curate or two.

"It was last year, though I find that I didn't put it down at the time, that at the concert in aid of the rebuilding of Pankford church I played Tartini's 'Il Trillo del Diavolo,' to me one of the weirdest and most wonderful bits of violin music in the world. I know that I was almost crying when I finished it. But next day I saw in the report in the local paper, written by 'Our Musical Man,' that 'Miss Fregelius then relieved the proceedings with a comic interlude on the violin, which was much appreciated by the audience.' It was that, I confess it--yes, the idiotic remark of 'Our Musical Man,' which made me determine if it was in any way possible that I would shake the dust of this village off my feet. Then, so far as my father is concerned, the stipend is wretched and decreasing. Also he has never really got on here; he is too shy,

too reserved, perhaps, in a way, too well read and educated, for these rough-and-ready people. Even his foreign name goes against him. The curates about here call him 'Frigid Fregelius.' It is the local idea of a joke.

"So I persuaded him to advertise for an exchange, although he said it was a mere waste of money, as nobody in his senses would look at this parish. Then came the wonderful thing. After the very first advertisement--yes, the very first--arrived a letter from Mr. Tomley, rector of Monksland, where the stipend is 100 pounds a year better than this, saying that he would wish to inquire into the matter. He has inquired, he has been, a pompous old gentleman with a slow voice and a single lock of white hair above his forehead; he says that it is satisfactory, and that, subject to the consent of the bishop, etc., he thinks that he will be glad to effect the exchange. Afterwards I found him in front of the house staring at the moorland behind, the sea in front, and the church in the middle, and looking very wretched. I asked him why he wanted to do it--the words popped out of my mouth, I couldn't help them; it was all so odd.

"Then I found out the reason. Mr. Tomley has a wife who is, or thinks she is--I am not sure which--an invalid, and who, I gather, speaks to Mr. Tomley with no uncertain sound. Mr. Tomley's wife was the niece of a long-departed rector who was inducted in 1815, and reigned here for forty-five years. He was rich, a bachelor, and rebuilt the church. (Is it not all written in the fly-leaf of the last register?) Mrs. Tomley

inherited her uncle's landed property in this neighbourhood, and says that she is only well in the air of Northumberland. So Mr. Tomley has to come up here, which he doesn't at all like, although I gather that he is glad to escape from his present squire, who seems to be a distinguished but arbitrary old gentleman, an ex-Colonel of the Guards; rather quarrelsome, too, with a habit of making fun of Mrs. Tomley. There's the explanation.

"So just because of the silly criticism of 'Our Musical Man' we are going to move several hundred miles. But is that really the cause? Are these things done of our own desire, or do we do them because we must, as our forefathers believed? Beneath our shouts and chattering they have always heard the slow thunder of the waves of Fate. Through the flare of our straw fires and the dust of our hurrying feet, they could always see the shadow of his black banners and the sheen of his advancing spears, and for them every wayside sign-post was painted with his finger.

"I think like that, too, perhaps because I am all, nearly all, Norse, and we do not shake off the strong and ancient shackle of our blood in the space of a few generations of Christian freedom and enlightenment. Yes, I see the finger of Fate upon this sign-post of an advertisement in a Church paper. His flag is represented to me by Mr. Tomley's white and cherished lock. Assuredly our migration is decreed of the Norns, therefore I accept it without question; but I should like to know what kind of a web of destiny they are weaving for us yonder in the place called Monksland."