

## CHAPTER XIV

### TOGETHER

On the afternoon of the first day after his arrival at the Abbey, some spirit in his feet moved Godfrey to go into the church. As though by instinct, he went to the chancel, and stood there contemplating the brass of the nameless Plantagenet lady. How long it was since he had looked upon her graven face and form draped in the stately habiliments of a bygone age! Then, he remembered with a pang, Isobel was with him, and they had seemed to be very near together. Now there was no Isobel, and they were very far apart, both in the spirit and in the flesh. For he had not heard of her return to England and imagined that she was still in Mexico, whence no tidings of her came to him.

There he stood among the dead, reflecting that we do not need to pass out of the body to know the meaning of death, since, as once Isobel had said herself, some separations are as bad, or worse. The story of the dead is, at any rate, completed; there is nothing more to be learned about them, and of them we imagine, perhaps quite erroneously, that we have no need to be jealous, since we cannot conceive that they may form new interests in another sphere. But with the living it is otherwise. Somewhere their life is continued; somewhere they are getting themselves friends or lovers and carrying on the daily round of being, and we have no share in them or in aught that they may do. And probably they have forgotten us. And, if we still happen to be attached to them,

oh! it hurts.

Thus mused Godfrey, trying to picture to himself what Isobel looked like when she had stood by his side on that long-past autumn eve, and only succeeded in remembering exactly what she looked like when she was kissing a rose with a certain knight in armour in a square garden, since for some perverse reason it was this picture that remained so painfully clear to his mind. Then he drifted off into speculations upon the general mystery of things of a sort that were common with him, and in these became oblivious of all else.

He did not even hear or see a tall young woman enter the church, clad in summer white, no, not when she was within five paces and, becoming suddenly aware of his presence, had stopped to study him with the acutest interest. In a flash Isobel knew who he was. Of course he was much changed, for Godfrey, who had matured early, as those of his generation were apt to do, especially if they had led a varied life, was now a handsome and well-built young man with a fine, thoughtful face and a quite respectable moustache.

"How he has changed, oh! how he has changed," she thought to herself. The raw boy had become a man, and as she knew at once by her woman's instinct, a man with a great deal in him. Isobel was a sensible member of her sex; one, too, who had seen something of the world by now, and she did not expect or wish for a hero or a saint built upon the mid-Victorian pattern, as portrayed in the books of the lady novelists

of that period. She wanted a man to be a man, by preference with the faults pertaining to the male nature, since she had observed that those who lacked these, possessed others, which to her robust womanhood seemed far worse, such as meanness and avarice and backbiting, and all the other qualities of the Pharisee.

Well, in Godfrey, whether she were right or wrong, with that swift glance of hers, she seemed to recognise a man as she wished a man to be. If that standard of hers meant that very possibly he had admired other women, the lady whom he had pulled up a precipice, for instance, she did not mind particularly, so long as he admired her, Isobel, most of all. That was her one sine qua non, that he should admire her most of all, or rather be fondest of her in his innermost self.

What was she thinking about? What was there to show that he cared one brass farthing about her? Nothing at all. And yet, why was he here where she had parted from him so long ago? Surely not to stare at the grave of a dead woman with whom he could have had nothing to do, since she left the world some five centuries before. And another question. What had brought her here, she who hated churches and all the mummerly that they signified?

Would he never wake up? Would he never realise her presence? Oh! then he could care nothing about her. Probably he was thinking of the girl he had pulled up a cliff in the Alps. But why did he come to this place to think of her?

Isobel stood quite still there and waited in the shadow of a Georgian tomb, till presently Godfrey did seem to grow aware that he was no longer alone. Something or somebody had impinged upon his intelligence. He began to look about him, though always in the wrong direction. Then, convinced that he was the victim of fancy, he spoke aloud as he had a bad habit of doing when by himself.

"It's very curious," he said, "but I could have sworn that Isobel was here, as near me as when we parted. I suppose that is what comes of thinking so much about her. Or do people leave something of themselves behind in places where they have experienced emotion? If so, churches ought to be very full of ghosts. I dare say that they are, only then no one could know it except those who had shared the emotion, and therefore they remain intangible. Still, I could have sworn that Isobel was here. Indeed, I seem to feel her now, and I hope that the dream will go on."

Listening there in the shadow, she heard, and flushed in her flesh and rejoiced in her innermost being. So he had not forgotten her, which is the true and real infidelity that never can be forgiven, at any rate, by a woman. So she was still something in his life, although he had not answered her letter years ago.

Then she grew angry with herself. What did it matter to her what he was, or thought, or did? It was absurd that she could be dependent

morally upon anyone, who must rely in life or death upon herself alone and on the strong soul within her. She was wroth with Godfrey for exciting such disturbance in--what was it--her spirit or her body? Nonsense, she had no spirit. That was a phantasy. Therefore it must be in her body which was her own particular property that should remain uninfluenced by any other body.

So it came about that the first words she spoke to him were somewhat rough in their texture. She stepped forward out of the shadow of the Georgian tomb and confronted him with a defiant air, her head thrown back, looking, to tell the truth, rather stately.

"I hoped that by this time you had given up talking to yourself, Godfrey, which, as I always told you, is a bad habit. I did not hear much of what you were mumbling, but I understood you to say that you thought I was here. Well, why shouldn't I be here?"

He stared at her blankly and answered:

"God knows, I don't! But since you ask the question, why are you here, Isobel? It is Isobel, isn't it, or am I still dreaming? Let me touch you and I shall know."

She drew back a little way, quite three inches.

"Of course it is Isobel, don't your senses tell you that without

wanting to touch me? Why, I knew it was you from the end of the church. But you ask me why I am here. I wish you would tell me. I was passing, and something drew me into this place. I suppose it was you, and if so, I say at once that I resent it; you have no right----"

"No, no, certainly not, but do let me touch you to make sure that you are Isobel."

"Very well," she said, and stretched out a hand towards him.

He caught it with his left which was nearest, and then with his right hand reached forward and seized her other hand. With a masterful movement he drew her towards him, and though she was a strong woman she seemed to have no power to resist. She thought that he was going to kiss her and did not care greatly if he did.

But he checked himself in time, and instead of pressing his lips upon hers, only kissed her hands, first one and then the other, for quite a long while: nor did she attempt to deny him, perhaps because a wild impulse took possession of her to kiss his in answer. Yes, his hands, or his lips, or even his coat or anything about him. Oh! it made her very angry, but there it was, for something rushed up in her which she had never felt before, something mad and wild and sweet.

She wrenched herself away at last and began to scold him again.

"What have you been doing all these years? Why did you never write to me?"

"Because I was too proud, as you never wrote to me."

"Too proud! Pride will be your ruin; it goes before every sort of fall. Besides, I did write to you. I can show you a copy of the letter, if I haven't torn it up."

"I never got it; did you post it yourself?"

"Yes, that is I took it to the Abbey House and left it to be addressed there."

"Oh! then perhaps it is there still," and he looked at her.

"Nonsense, no one could have been so mean, not even----"

He shrugged his shoulders, a trick he had learned abroad, then said:

"Well, it doesn't matter now, does it, Isobel?"

"Yes, it matters a lot. Years of misunderstanding and doubt and loss, when life is so short. I might have married or all sorts of things."

"What has my not receiving your letter got to do with that?" he asked,

astonished.

"Nothing at all. Why do you ask such silly questions? I only meant that if I had married I should not have been here, and we should never have met again."

"Well, you are here and we have met in this church, where we parted."

"Yes, it's odd, isn't it? I wish it had been somewhere else. I don't like this gloomy old place with its atmosphere of death. Come outside."

They went, and when they were through the churchyard gates walked at hazard towards the stream which ran through the grounds of Hawk's Hall. Here they sat down upon a fallen willow, watching the swallows skim over the surface of the placid waters, and for a while were silent. They had so much to say to each other that it seemed as though scarcely they knew where to commence.

"Tell me," she said at length, "were you in the square garden on the night of that dance at which I came out? Oh! I see by your look that you were. Then why did you not speak to me instead of standing behind a bush, watching in that mean fashion?"

"I wasn't properly dressed for parties, and--and--you seemed to be--very much engaged--with a rose and a knight in armour."

"Engaged! It was only part of a game. I wrote and told you all about it in the letter you did not get. Did you never kiss a flower for a joke and give it to someone, not knowing that you were being watched?"

Godfrey coloured and shifted uneasily on his log.

"Well, as a matter of fact," he said, "it is odd that you should have guessed--for something of the sort did once happen quite by accident. Also I was watched."

"I!--you mean we. One doesn't kiss flowers by oneself and give them to the air. It would be more ridiculous even than the other thing."

"I will tell you all about it if you like," he stammered confusedly.

She looked at him with her large, steady grey eyes, and answered in a cold voice:

"No, thank you, I don't like. Nothing bores me so much as other people's silly love affairs."

Baffled in defence, Godfrey resorted to attack.

"What has become of the knight in armour?" he asked.

"He is married and has twins. I saw the announcement of their birth in

the paper yesterday. And what has become of the lady with the flower? For since there was a flower, there must have been a lady; I suppose the same whom you pulled up the precipice."

"She is married also, to her cousin, but I don't know that she has any children yet, and I never pulled her up any precipice. It was a man I pulled, a very heavy one. My arm isn't quite right yet."

"Oh!" said Isobel. Then with another sudden change of voice she went on. "Now tell me all about yourself, Godfrey. There must be such lots to say, and I long to hear."

So he told her, and she told him of herself, and they talked and talked till the shadows of advancing night began to close around them. Suddenly Godfrey looked at his watch, of which he could only just see the hands.

"My goodness!" he said, "it is half-past seven."

"Well, what about it? It doesn't matter when I dine, for I have come down alone here for a few days, a week perhaps, to get the house ready for my father and his friends."

"Yes, but my father dines at seven, and if there is one thing he hates it is being kept waiting for dinner."

She looked as though she thought that it did not much matter whether or no Mr. Knight waited for his dinner, then said:

"Well, you can come up to the Hall and dine with me."

"I think I had better not," he answered. "You see, we are getting on so well together--I mean my father and I, and I don't want to begin a row again. He would hate it."

"You mean, Godfrey, that he would hate your dining with me. Well, that is true, for he always loathed me like poison, and I don't think he is a man to change his mind. So perhaps you had better go. Do you think we shall be allowed to see each other again?" she added with sarcasm.

"Of course. Let's meet here to-morrow at eleven. My father is going to a Diocesan meeting and won't be back till the evening. So we might spend the day together if you have nothing better to do."

"Let me see. No, I have no engagement. You see, I only came down half an hour before we met in the church."

Then they rose from their willow log and stood looking at each other, a very proper pair. Something welled up in him and burst from his lips.

"How beautiful you have grown," he said.

She laughed a little, very softly, and said:

"Beautiful! I? Those Alpine snows affect the sight, don't they? I felt like that on Popocatepetl. Or is it the twilight that I have to thank? Oh! you silly old Godfrey, you must have been living among very plain people."

"You are beautiful," he replied stubbornly, "the most beautiful woman I ever saw. You always were, and you always will be."

Again she laughed, for who of her sex is there that does not like to be called beautiful, especially when she knows that it is meant, and that whatever her personal shortcomings, to the speaker she is beautiful? But this time the only answer she attempted was:

"You said you were late, and you are getting later. Run home, there's a good little boy."

"Why do you laugh at me?" he asked.

"Because I am laughing at myself," she answered, "and you should have your share."

Then very nearly he kissed her, only he was in such a hurry, also the willow log, a large one, was between them; possibly she had arranged that this should be so. So he could only press her hand and depart,

muttering something indistinguishable. She watched him vanish, after which she sat down again on the log and really did laugh. Still, it was a queer kind of merriment, for by degrees it turned into little sobs and tears.

"You little fool, what has happened to you?" she asked herself. "Are you--are you--and if so, is he--? Oh! nonsense, and yet, something has happened, for I never felt like this before. I thought it was all rubbish, mere natural attraction, part of Nature's scheme and so on, as they write in the clever books. But it's more than that--at least it would be if I were---- Besides, I'm ages older than he is, although I was born six months later. I'm a woman full-grown, and he is only a boy. If he hadn't been a boy he would have taken his advantage when he must have known that I was weak as water, just for the joy of seeing him again. Now he has lost his chance, if he wanted one, for by to-morrow I shall be strong again, and there shall be no more----"

Then she looked at the backs of her hands which she could not see because of the gathering darkness, and as they were invisible, kissed them instead, just as though they belonged to someone else. After this she sat a while brooding and listening to the pulsing of her heart, which was beating with unusual strength this night. As she did so in that mysterious hour which sometimes comes to us in English summers, a great change fell upon her. When she sat down upon that fallen tree she was still a girl and virginal; when she rose from it she was a developed, loving woman. It was as though a spirit had visited her and

whispered in her ear. She could almost hear the words. They were:

"Fulfil your fate. Love and be loved with body and with spirit, with heart and soul and strength."

At length she rose, and as she did so said aloud:

"I do not know who or what I have to thank for life and all that makes me, me. But I am glad to have been born, now, who have often wished that I had never been born. Even if I knew that I must pass away to-night, I should still be glad, since I have learned that there is something in me which cannot die. It came when that man kissed my hands, and it will endure for ever."

Godfrey was late for dinner, very late, and what was worse, his father had waited for him.

"I suppose you forgot that I dined at seven, not at eight," was his cold greeting, for Mr. Knight, a large eater like many teetotallers, was one of those people who make a fetish of punctuality at meals, and always grow cross when they are hungry.

Godfrey, whose mind had not been steadied by the events of the afternoon, became confused and replied that he was extremely sorry, but

the fact was he had met Isobel and, in talking to her, had not noticed the time.

"Isobel!" exclaimed his father, whose voice was now icy. "What Isobel?"

"I never knew but one, Father."

"Oh! I suppose you mean Miss Blake. I had no idea she was here; indeed, I thought she was still in Mexico. But doubtless you were better informed."

"No, Father, I met her accidentally. She has returned to England."

"That is obvious, Godfrey----"

"She has come down," he continued in a hurry, "to get the house ready for Sir John, who arrives shortly."

"Oh! has she? What a strange coincidence! All the years of our separation while you were away she was away, but within two days of your return she returns."

"Yes, it does seem odd," agreed the flustered Godfrey, "but it's lucky, isn't it, for, of course, I am glad to see her again."

Mr. Knight finished carving himself a helping of beef, and let the

knife fall with a clatter into the dish. Then he said in carefully chosen words:

"You may think it lucky--or well arranged--but I must differ. I tell you at once that I consider Miss Blake a most pernicious young woman, and as your father I can only express the hope that you do not intend to allow her to re-assert her evil influence over you."

Godfrey was about to answer with wrath, but changed his mind and remained silent. So the topic dropped, but that it stood very straight upon its feet in Mr. Knight's mind was clear from the compression of his thin lips and the ill-humour of his remarks about the coldness and overdone character of the beef and sundry other household matters. As soon as the meal was concluded and he had washed it down with a last glass of water and with a very wry face thanked Providence for all that he had received, he retired into his study and was seen no more till prayer-time.

Nor was he seen then by Godfrey, who had gone out to smoke his pipe since his father could not bear the smell of tobacco in the house, and wandered unconsciously towards the Hall. There he stood, gazing at a light which he knew came from Isobel's window, and lost in this unfruitful contemplation, once more forgot the time. When he arrived home it was to find the house in darkness and a note in his father's handwriting on the hall table requesting him to be careful to lock the door, as everyone had gone to bed.

He went, too, but could not sleep, for, strangely enough, that disturbance of body and spirit which had afflicted Isobel possessed him also. It seemed wonderful to him that he should have found her again, whom he thought to be so utterly lost, and grown so sweet and dear. How could he have lived all this while without her, he wondered, and, another thought, how could he bear to part with her once more? Oh! she was his life, and--why should they part? She had not minded when he kissed her hands, at which, of course, she might have been angry; indeed, she left them to be kissed for quite a long while, though not half long enough. Perhaps she did not wish that they should part either, or perhaps she only desired that they should be just friends as before. It seemed almost impossible that they could become more than friends, even if she cared to do so, which he could scarcely hope.

What was he? A young fellow, twenty, with only a little money and all his way to make in the world. And what was she? A grand young lady, rather younger than himself, it was true, but seeming years older, who was a great heiress, they said, and expected to marry a lord, someone born with a silver spoon in his mouth, whose fortune had been made for him by other people. Moreover, his father hated her because their religious views were different, and her father hated him, or used to, for other reasons.

Yes, it was quite impossible--and yet Nature seemed to take no account of that: Nature seemed to tell him that it was absolutely possible, and

indeed right, and what she, Nature, wished. Also this same persistent Nature seemed to suggest to him that Isobel was her most willing and obedient pupil, and that perhaps if he could look into her heart he would find that she did care, and very much more than for the wealth and the hypothetical lord.

Nature seemed to suggest, too, that Isobel's thoughts were with him at that moment; that she was uncommonly near to him in soul if not in body; that she was thinking about him as he was thinking about her, and saying much the same things to herself as he was saying to himself. Indeed, he even began a whispered conversation with her, of a sort he would not have ventured upon had she been there, pausing between the sentences for her answers, which, as he imagined them, were very satisfactory indeed.

By degrees, however, question and answer grew less frequent and further apart as he dozed off and finally sank into a deep sleep. So deep was it, indeed, that he was awakened only by the clamour of the breakfast bell, and when he arrived downstairs, to be confronted by some cold bacon on an uncovered dish, his father had departed to the Diocesan Conference. Well, this fact had its consolations, and bacon, however cold, with contentment is better than bacon hot where contention is.

So he ate it and anything else he could find with appetite, and then went upstairs to shave and do his hair nicely and to put on a new suit of clothes, which he considered became him. Also, as he had still

three-quarters of an hour to spare, he began to write a little poem about Isobel, which was a dismal failure, to tell the truth, since he could think of no satisfactory rhyme to her name, except "O well!" which, however he put it, sounded silly.

At last, rather too early, he threw the sheet of paper into the fireplace and started, only to find that although it still lacked a quarter of an hour to eleven, Isobel was already seated on that tree.

"What have you been doing to yourself?" she asked, "putting on those smart London clothes? I like the old grey things you had on last night ever so much better, and I wanted you to climb a tree to get me some young jackdaws. And--good gracious! Godfrey, your head smells like a whole hairdresser's shop. Please come to the other side, to leeward of me."

He murmured something about liking to look tidy, and then remarked that she seemed rather finely dressed herself.

"It's only my Mexican hat," she answered, touching the big sombrero, woven from the finest Panama grass, which she was wearing, "and the necklace is made of little gold Aztec idols that were found in a grave. They are very rare; a gentleman gave them to me, and afterwards I was horrified to find that he had paid an awful lot for them, £200, I believe. Do you understand about the Aztec gods? If not I will explain them all to you. This big one in the middle is Huitzilcoatl, the god

of----"

"No, no," interrupted Godfrey, "I don't and I don't want to. I think them very ugly, and I always understood that ladies did not accept such expensive presents from gentlemen. Who was he?"

"An American millionaire who didn't wear armour," she answered blandly. Then she changed the subject with the original remark that the swallows were flying higher than they had done on the previous evening, when they looked as though one could almost catch them with one's hand.

Godfrey reflected to himself that other things which had seemed quite close on the previous night were now like the swallows, far out of reach. Only he took comfort in the remembrance that swallows, however near, are evasive birds, not easy to seize unless you can find them sleeping. Next she began to tell him all about the Mexican gods, whether he wanted to listen or not, and he sat there in the glory of his new clothes and brilliantined hair, and gazed at her till she asked him to desist as she felt as though she were being mesmerised.

This led him to his spiritualistic experiences of which he told her all the story, and by the time it was finished, behold! it was the luncheon hour.

"It is very interesting," she said as they entered the Hall, "and I can't laugh at it all as I should have done once, I don't quite know

why. But I hope, Godfrey, that you will have no more to do with spirits."

"No, not while----" and he looked at her.

"While what?"

"While--there are such nice bodies in the world," he stammered, colouring.

She coloured also, tossed her head, and went to wash her hands.

The afternoon they spent in hunting for imaginary young jackdaws in a totally nebulous tree. Isobel grew rather cross over its non-discovery, swearing that she remembered it well years ago, and that there were always young jackdaws there.

"Perhaps it has been cut down," suggested Godfrey. "I am told that your father has been improving the place a great deal in that kind of way, so as to make it up to date and scientific and profitable, and all the rest of it. Also if it hasn't, there would have been no young jackdaws, since they must have flown quite six weeks ago."

"Then why couldn't you say that at once, instead of making us waste all this time?" asked Isobel with indignation.

"I don't know," replied Godfrey in a somewhat vacuous fashion. "It was all the same to me if we were hunting for young jackdaws or the man in the moon, as long as we were together."

"Godfrey, it is evident that you have been overworking and are growing foolish. I make excuses for you, since anybody who passed first out of Sandhurst must have overworked, but it does not alter the fact. Now I must go home and see about that house, for as yet I have arranged nothing at all, and the place is in an awful state. Remember that my father is coming down presently with either six or eight terrible people, I forget which. All I know about them is that they are extremely rich and expect to be what is called 'done well.'"

"Must you?" remarked Godfrey, looking disappointed.

"Yes, I must. And so must you. Your father is coming back by the five o'clock train, and I advise you to be there to meet him. Perhaps I shall see you to-morrow some time."

"I can't," exclaimed Godfrey in a kind of wail. "I am to be taken off to a school in some town or other, I forget which, that my father has been examining. I suppose it is the speech day, and he proposes to introduce me as a kind of object lesson because I have passed first in an examination."

"Yes, as a shining example and--an advertisement. Well, perhaps we

shall meet later," and without giving him an opportunity of saying more she vanished away.