

CHAPTER XV

FOR EVER

Godfrey managed to be late again, and only reached home five minutes after his father, who had bicycled instead of walking from the station as he supposed that he would do.

"I forgot to give orders about your lunch," said Mr. Knight tentatively. "I hope that you managed to get some."

"Oh, yes, Father; that is, I lunched out, at the Hall."

"Indeed! I did not know that Sir John had arrived."

"No, he hasn't; at least I have not seen him. I lunched with Isobel."

"Indeed!" remarked Mr. Knight again, and the subject dropped.

Next day, Godfrey, once more arrayed in his best clothes, attended the prize-giving and duly was made to look foolish, only getting home just in time for dinner, after which his father requested him to check certain examination papers. Then came Sunday and church at which Isobel did not appear; two churches in fact, and after these a tea party to the churchwardens and their wives, to whom Godfrey was expected to explain the wonders of the Alps. Before it was over, if he could have

managed it, these stolid farmers with their families would have lain at the bottom of the deepest moraine that exists amid those famous mountains. But there they were, swallowing tea and munching cake while they gazed on him with ox-like eyes, and he plunged into wild explanations as to the movements of glaciers.

"Something like one of them new-fangled machines what carry hay up on to the top of stacks," said Churchwarden No. 1 at length.

"Did you ever sit on a glacier while it slid from the top to the bottom of a mountain, Master Godfrey, and if so, however did you get up again?" asked Churchwarden No. 2.

"Is a glacier so called after the tradesman what cuts glass, because glass and ice are both clear-like?" inquired Churchwarden No. 1, filled with sudden inspiration.

Then Godfrey, in despair, said that he thought it was and fled away, only to be reproached afterwards by his father for having tried to puzzle those excellent and pious men.

On Monday his luck was better, since Mr. Knight was called away immediately after lunch to take a funeral in a distant parish of which the incumbent was absent at the seaside. Godfrey, by a kind of instinct, sped at once to the willow log by the stream, where, through an outreaching of the long arm of coincidence, he found Isobel seated.

After casually remarking that the swallows were flying neither high nor low that day, but as it were in mid-air, she added that she had not seen him for a long while.

"No, you haven't--say for three years," he answered, and detailed his tribulations.

"Ah!" said Isobel, "that's always the way; one is never left at leisure to follow one's own fancies in this world. To-morrow, for instance, my father and all his horrible friends--I don't know any of them, except one, but from past experience I presume them to be horrible--are coming down to lunch, and are going to stop for three days' partridge shooting. Their female belongings are going to stop also, or some of them are, which means that I shall have to look after them."

"It's all bad news to-day," remarked Godfrey, shaking his head. "I've just had a telegram saying that I must report myself on Wednesday, goodness knows why, for I expected to get a month's leave."

"Oh!" said Isobel, looking a little dismayed. "Then let us make the best of to-day, for who knows what to-morrow may bring forth?"

Who indeed? Certainly not either of these young people.

They talked awhile seated by the river; then began to walk through certain ancient grazing grounds where the monks used to run their

cattle. Their conversation, fluent enough at first, grew somewhat constrained and artificial, since both of them were thinking of matters different from those that they were trying to dress out in words; intimate, pressing, burning matters that seemed to devour their intelligences of everyday with a kind of eating fire. They grew almost silent, talking only at random and listening to the beating of their own hearts rather than to the words that fell from each other's lips.

The sky clouded over, and some heavy drops of rain began to fall.

"I suppose that we must go in," said Isobel, "we shall be soaked presently," and she glanced at her light summer attire.

"Where?" exclaimed Godfrey. "The Abbey? No, my father will be back by now; it must be the Hall."

"Very well, but I dare say my father is there by now, for I understand that he is coming down this afternoon to arrange about the shooting."

"Great heavens!" groaned Godfrey, "and I wanted to--tell you a story which I thought perhaps might interest you, and I don't know when I shall get another chance--now."

"Then why did you not tell your story before?" she inquired with some irritation.

"Oh! because I have only just thought of it," he replied rather wildly.

At this moment they were passing the church, and the rain began to fall in earnest. By some mutual impulse they entered through the chancel door which was always unlocked, and by some mutual folly, left it open.

Advancing instinctively to the tombs of the unknown Plantagenet lady and her knight which were so intimately connected with the little events of their little lives, they listened for a while to the rush of the rain upon the leaden roof, saying nothing, till the silence grew irksome indeed. Each waited for the other to break it, but with a woman's infinite patience Isobel waited the longer. There she stood, staring at the brass of the Plantagenet lady, still as the bones of that lady which lay beneath.

"My story," said Godfrey at last with a gasp, and stopped.

"Yes," said Isobel. "What is it?"

"Oh!" he exclaimed in an agony, "a very short one. I love you, that's all."

A little quiver ran through her, causing her dress to shake and the gold Mexican gods on her necklace to tinkle against each other. Then she grew still as a stone, and raising those large and steady eyes of

hers, looked him up and down, finally fixing them upon his own.

"Is that true?" she asked.

"True! It is as true as life and death, or as Heaven and Hell."

"I don't know anything about Heaven and Hell; they are hypothetical, are they not? Life and death are enough for me," and she stopped.

"Then by life and death, for life and death, and for ever, I love you, Isobel."

"Thank you," she said, and stopped once more.

"You don't help one much. Have you nothing to say?"

"What is there to say? You made a statement for which I thanked you. You asked no question."

"It is a question," he exclaimed indignantly. "If I love you, of course I want to know if you love me."

"Then why did you not say so? But," she added very deliberately, "since you want to know, I do and always have and always shall, in life or death--and for ever--if that means anything."

He stared at her, tried to utter something and failed. Then he fell back upon another very primitive and ancient expedient. Flinging his arms about her, he pressed her to his heart and kissed her again and again and again; nor, in her moment of complete surrender, did she scruple to kiss him back.

It was while they were thus engaged, offering a wonderful spectacle of love triumphant and rejoicing in its triumph, that another person who was passing the church bethought him of its shelter as a refuge from the pouring rain. Seeing the open door, Mr. Knight, for it was he, slipped into the great building in his quiet, rather cat-like fashion, but on its threshold saw, and stopped. Notwithstanding the shadows, he recognised them in a moment. More, the sight of this pair, the son whom he disliked and the woman whom he hated, thus embraced, thus lost in a sea of passion, moved him to white fury, so that he lifted his clenched hands above his head and shook them, muttering:

"And in my church, my church!"

Then unable to bear more of this spectacle, he slipped away again, heedless of the pouring skies.

By nature, although in obedience to a rash promise once he had married, Mr. Knight was a true woman-hater. That sex and everything to do with it were repellent to him. Even the most harmless manifestations of natural affection between male and female he considered disgusting,

indeed indecent, and if these were carried any further he held it to be among the greatest of crimes. He was one of those who, if he had the power, would have hounded any poor girl who, in the country phrase, "had got into trouble," to the river brink and over it, as a creature not fit to live; or if she escaped destruction, would have, and indeed often had, pursued her with unceasing malignity, thinking that thereby he did God service. His attitude towards such a person was that of an Inquisitor towards a fallen nun.

Moreover, he could do this with a clear conscience, since he could truly say that he was qualified to throw the first stone, being of those who mistake personal aversion for personal virtue. Because his cold-hearted nature rejected it, he loathed this kind of human failing and felt good in the loathing. Nor did it ever occur to him to reflect that others, such as secret malice, jealousy and all uncharitableness on which his heart fed, might be much worse than the outrush of human passion in obedience to the almighty decree of Nature that is determined not to die.

These being his views, the feelings that the sight awoke in him of this pair declaring their holy love in the accustomed, human fashion, can scarcely be measured and are certainly beyond description. Had he been another sort of man who had found some devil flogging a child to death, the rage and indignation aroused in his breast could not have been greater, even if it were his own child.

The one thing that Mr. Knight had feared for years was that Godfrey, who, as he knew, was fonder of Isobel than of any other living creature, should come to love her in a fuller fashion: Isobel, a girl who had laughed at and flouted him and once told him to his face that a study of his character and treatment of others had done more to turn her from the Christian religion than anything else.

In a sense he was unselfish in this matter, or rather his hate mastered his selfishness. He knew very well that Isobel would be a great match for Godfrey, and he was by no means a man who underrated money and position and their power. He guessed, too, that she really loved him and would have made him the best of wives; that with her at his side he might do almost anything in the world. But these considerations did not in the least soften his loathing of the very thought of such a marriage. Incredible as it may seem, he would rather have seen Godfrey dead than the happy husband of Isobel.

Mr. Knight, drunk with rage, reeled rather than walked away from the church door, wondering what he might do to baulk and shame that living, loving pair who could kiss and cling even among the tombs. A thought came to him, a very evil thought which he welcomed as an inspiration sent straight from an offended Heaven. Sir John Blake had come home; he knew it, for he had passed him on the road seated alone in a fine motor-car, and they had waved their hands to each other not ten minutes before. He would go and tell him all; in the character of an upright man who does not like to see his rich neighbour harmed by the

entanglement of that neighbour's daughter in an undesirable relationship. That Sir John would consider himself to be harmed, he was sure enough, being by no means ignorant of his plans and aspirations for the future of that daughter, who was expected to make a great alliance in return for the fortune which she would bring to her husband.

No sooner said than done. In three minutes he was at the Hall and, as it chanced, met Sir John by the front door.

"Hullo, Reverend! How are you? You look very wet and miserable; taking refuge from the rain, I suppose, though it is clearing off now. Have a brandy and soda, or a glass of port?"

"Thank you, Sir John, I am an abstainer, but a cup of hot tea would be welcome."

"Tea--ah! yes, but that takes time to make, so I should have to leave you to drink it by yourself. Fact is I want to find my daughter. Some of those blessed guests of mine, including Mounteroy, the young Earl, you know, whom I wish her to meet particularly, are coming down to-night by the last train and not to-morrow, so I must get everything arranged in a hurry. Can't make out where the girl has gone."

"I think I can tell you, Sir John," said Mr. Knight with a sickly smile; "at least I saw her a little while ago rather peculiarly engaged."

"Where, and how was she engaged?"

Without asking permission Mr. Knight entered the house and stepped into a cloak-room that opened out of the hall. Being curious, Sir John followed him. Mr. Knight shut the door and, supporting himself against the frame of a marble wash-basin with gilded taps, said:

"I saw her in the chancel of the Abbey Church and she was kissing my son, Godfrey; at least he was kissing her, and she seemed to be responding to his infamous advances, for her arms were round his neck and I heard sounds which suggested that this was so."

"Holy Moses!" ejaculated Sir John, "what in the name of hell are they after?"

"Your question, stripped of its unnecessary and profane expletives, seems easy to answer. I imagine that my immoral son has just proposed to your daughter, and been accepted with--well, unusual emphasis."

"Perhaps you are right. But if he had I don't see anything particularly immoral about it. If I had never done anything worse than that I shouldn't feel myself called to go upon my knees and cry peccavi. However, that ain't the point. The point is that a game of this sort don't at all suit my book, but," here he looked at the clergyman shrewdly, "why do you come to tell about it? I should have thought

that under all the circumstances you should have been glad. Isobel isn't likely to be exactly a beggar, you know, so it seems devilish queer that you should object, as I gather you do; unless it is to the kissing, which has been heard of before."

"I do object most strongly, Sir John," replied Mr. Knight in his iciest tones. "I disapprove entirely of your daughter, whose lack of any Christian feeling is notorious, and whose corrupting influence will, I fear, make my son as bad as herself."

"Damn her lack of Christian feeling, and damn yours and your impudence too, you half-drowned church rat! Why don't you call her Jezebel at once, and have done with it? One of the things I like about her is that she has the pluck to snap her fingers at such as you and all your ignorant superstitions. What are you getting at? That is what I want to know."

"I put aside your insults to which as a clergyman it is my duty to turn the other cheek," replied Mr. Knight, with a furious gasp. "As to the rest I am trying to get at the pure and sacred truth."

"You look as though you would do better to get at the pure and sacred brandy," remarked Sir John, surveying him critically, "but that's your affair. Now, what is the truth?"

"Alas! that I must say it. I believe my son to be that basest of

creatures, a fortune-hunter. How did he get that money left to him by another woman?"

"Don't know, I'm sure. Perhaps the old girl found the young chap attractive, and wished to acknowledge favours received. Such things have been known. You don't suppose he forged her will, do you?"

"You are ribald, Sir, ribald."

"Am I? Well, and you are jolly offensive. Thank God you weren't my father. Now, from what I remember of that boy of yours, I shouldn't have thought that he was a fortune-hunter. I should have thought that he was a young beggar who wished to get hold of the girl he fancies, and that's all. Still, you know him best, and I dare say you are right. Anyway, for your own peculiar and crack-brained reasons, you don't want this business, and I say at once you can't want it less than I do. Do you suppose that I wish to see my only child, who will have half a million of money and might be a countess, or half a dozen countesses, to-morrow, married to the son of a beggarly sniveller like you, for as you are so fond of the pure and sacred truth, I'll give it you--a fellow who can come and peach upon your own boy and his girl."

"My conscience and my duty----" began Mr. Knight.

"Oh! drat your conscience and blow your duty. You're a spy and a backbiting tell-tale, that's what you are. Did you never kiss a girl

yourself?"

"Never until after I was married, when we are specially enjoined by the great Apostle----"

"Then I'm sorry for your wife, for she must have had a lot to teach you. But let's stop slanging, we have our own opinions of each other and there's an end. Now we have both the same object, you because you are a pious crank and no more human than a dried eel, and I because I am a man of the world who want to see my daughter where she ought to be, wearing a coronet in the House of Lords. The question is: How is the job to be done? You don't understand Isobel, but I do. If her back is put up, wild horses won't move her. She'd snap her fingers in my face, and tell me to go to a place that you are better acquainted with than I am, or will be, and take my money with me. Of course, I could hold her for a few months, till she is of age perhaps, but after that, No. So it seems that the only chance is your son. Now, what's his weak point? Can he be bought off?"

"Certainly not," said Mr. Knight.

"Oh! that's odd in one who, you say, is a fortune-hunter. Well, what is it? Everyone has a weak point, and another girl won't do just now."

"His weakest point is his fondness for that treacherous and abominable sex of which I have just had so painful an example; and in the church

too, yes, in my church."

"And a jolly good place to get to in such a rain, for of course they didn't know that you were hiding under the pews. But I've told you that cock won't fight at present. What's the next?"

At these accumulated insults Mr. Knight turned perfectly livid with suppressed rage. But he did suppress it, for he had an object to gain which, to his perverted mind, was the most important in the whole world--namely, the final separation of his son and Isobel.

"His next bad point," he went on, "is his pride, which is abnormal, although from childhood I have done my best to inculcate humility of spirit into his heart. He cannot bear any affront, or even neglect. For instance, he left me for some years just because he did not consider that he was received properly on his return from Switzerland; also because he went into a rage, for he has a very evil temper if roused, when I suggested that he wanted to run after your daughter's money."

"Well, it wasn't a very nice thing to say, was it? But I think I see light. He's proud, is he, and don't like allusions to fortune-hunting. All right; I'll rub his nose in the dirt and make him good. I'm just the boy for a job of that sort, as perhaps you will agree, my reverend friend; and if he shows his airs to me, I'll kick him off the premises. Come on! I dare say we shall find them still in the church, where they think themselves so snug, although the rain has stopped."

So this precious pair started, each of them bent, though for different reasons, upon as evil a mission as the mind of man can conceive. For what is there more wicked than to wish to bring about the separation and subsequent misery of two young people who, as they guessed well enough, loved each other body and soul, and thereby to spoil their lives? Yet, so strange is human nature, that neither of them thought that they were committing any sin. Mr. Knight, now and afterwards, justified himself with the reflection that he was parting his son from a "pernicious" young woman of strong character, who would probably lead him away from religion as it was understood by him. One also whom he looked upon as the worst of outcasts, who deserved and doubtless was destined to inhabit hell, because hastily she had rejected his form of faith, as the young are apt to do, for reasons, however hollow, that seemed to her sufficient.

He took no account of his bitter, secret jealousy of this girl, who, as he thought, had estranged his son from him, and prevented him from carrying out his cherished plans of making of him a clergyman like himself, or of his innate physical hatred of women which caused him to desire that Godfrey should remain celibate. These motives, although he was well aware of them, he set down as naught, being quite sure, in view of the goodness of his aims, that they would be overlooked or even commended by the Power above Whom he pictured in his mind's eye as a furious old man, animated chiefly by jealousy and a desire to wreak vengeance on and torture the helpless. For it is the lessons of the Old

Testament that sink most deeply into the souls of Mr. Knight and his kind.

Sir John's ends were quite different. He was the very vulgarest of self-made men, coarse and brutal by nature, a sensualist of the type that is untouched by imagination; a man who would crush anyone who stood in his path without compunction, just because that person did stand in his path. But he was extremely shrewd--witness the way he saw through Mr. Knight--and in his own fashion very able--witness his success in life.

Moreover, since a man of his type has generally some object beyond the mere acquiring of money, particularly after it has been acquired, he had his, to rise high, for he was very ambitious. His natural discernment set all his own failings before him in the clearest light; also their consequences. He knew that he was vulgar and brutal, and that as a result all persons of real gentility looked down upon him, however much they might seem to cringe before his money and power, yes, though they chanced to be but labouring men.

For instance, his wife had done so, which was one of the reasons why he hated her, as indeed had all her distinguished relatives, after they came to know him, although he lent them money. He knew that even if he became a peer, as he fully expected to do, it would be the same story; outward deference and lip service, but inward dislike and contempt. In short, there were limits which he could never hope to pass, and

therefore so far as he was concerned, his ambitious thirst must remain unslaked.

But he had a daughter whom Nature, perhaps because of her mother's blood, had set in quite a different class. She had his ability, but she was gentle-born, which he was not, one who could mix with and be welcomed by the highest in the world, and this without the slightest question. If not beautiful, she was very distinguished; she had presence and what the French call "the air." Further, she would be one of the richest women in England. Considered from his point of view, therefore, it was but natural that he should desire her to make a brilliant marriage and found a great family, which he would thus have originated--at any rate, to some extent. Night and day he longed that this should come about, and it was the reason why the young Lord Mounteroy was visiting Hawk's Hall.

Mounteroy had met Isobel at a dinner-party in London the other day and admired her. He had told an old lady--a kind of society tout--who had repeated it to Sir John, that he wished to get married, and that Isobel Blake was the sort of girl he would like to marry. He was a clever man, also ambitious, one who had hopes of some day ruling the country, but to do this he needed behind him great and assured fortune in addition to his ancient but somewhat impoverished rank. In short, she suited his book, and he suited that of Sir John. Now, the thing to do was to bring it about that he should also suit Isobel's book. And just at the critical moment this accursed accident had happened. Oh! it was too

much.

No wonder that Sir John was filled with righteous wrath and a stern determination to "make things hot" for the cause of the "accident" as, led to the attack by the active but dripping Mr. Knight whom he designated in his heart as that "little cur of a parson," much as an overfed and bloated bloodhound might be by some black and vicious mongrel, he tramped heavily towards the church. Indeed they made a queer contrast, this small, active but fierce-faced man in his sombre, shiny garments and dingy white tie, and the huge, ample-paunched baronet with his red, flat face, heavy lips and projecting but intelligent eyes, clothed in a new suit, wearing an enormous black pearl in his necktie and a diamond ring on his finger; the very ideal of Mammon in every detail of his person and of his carefully advertised opulence.

Isobel, whose humour had its sardonic side, and who was the first to catch sight of them when they reached the church, Mr. Knight tripping ahead, and Sir John hot with the exercise in the close, moist air, lumbering after him with his mouth open, compared them in her mind to a fierce little pilot fish conducting an overfed shark to some helpless prey which it had discovered battling with the waters of circumstance; that after all, was only another version of the mongrel and the bloodhound. Also she compared them to other things, even less complimentary.

Yet none of these, perhaps, was really adequate, either to the evil intentions or the repellent appearance of this pair as they advanced upon their wicked mission of jealousy and hate.