

CHAPTER XVI

LOVE AND LOSS

All unaware that they had been seen and by no friendly eyes, Godfrey and Isobel remained embracing each other for quite a long while. At length she wrenched herself away and, sinking on to a chancel bench, motioned to him to seat himself beside her.

"Let us talk," she said in a new voice, a strange voice that was low and rich, such as he had never heard her use, "let us talk, my dear."

"What of?" he asked almost in a whisper as he took his place, and her hand, which he held against his beating heart. "My soul has been talking to yours for the last five minutes, or is it five seconds or five years? It does not seem to have anything more to say."

"Yet I think there is plenty to be said, Godfrey. Do you know that while we were kissing each other there some very queer ideas got hold of me, not only of the sort which might be expected in our case? You remember that Plantagenet lady who lies buried beneath where we were standing, she whose dress I once copied to wear at the ball when I came out."

"Don't speak of that," he interrupted, "for then you were kissing someone else."

"It is not true. I never kissed anyone else in that way, and I do not think I ever shall. I kissed a rose, that's all, and I gather that you have done as much and very likely a great deal more. But it is of the lady I am speaking, not of the ball. She seemed to come up from her grave and enter into me, and say something."

"Well, what did she say, Isobel?" he asked dreamily.

"That's it, I don't know, although she talked to me as one might to oneself. All I know is that it was of trouble and patience and great joy, and war and tragedy in which I must be intimately concerned, and--after the tragedy--of a most infinite rest and bliss."

"I expect she was telling you her own story, which seems to have ended well," he replied in the same dreamy fashion.

"Yes, I think so, but also that she meant that her story would be my story, copied you know, as I copied her dress. Of course it is all nonsense, just the influence of the place taking hold of me when overcome by other things, but at the time it seemed very real."

"So does a bad dream," said Godfrey, "but for all that it isn't real. Still it is odd that everything important seems to happen to us within a few feet of that lady's dust, and I can't quite disbelieve in spirits and their power of impressing themselves upon us; I wish I could. The

strange thing is that you should put any faith in them."

"I don't, though I admit that my views about such matters are changing. You know I used to be sure that when we die everything is over with us. Now I think differently, why I cannot say."

Then the subject dropped, because really they were both wrapped in the great joy of a glorious hour and disinclined to dwell upon fancies about a woman who had died five hundred years ago, or on metaphysical speculations. Also the fear of what might follow upon that hour haunted them more vividly than any hovering ghost, if such there were.

"My dear," said Isobel, "I am sorry, but I must say it; I am sure that there will be trouble about this business."

"No doubt, Isobel; there always is trouble, at least where I am concerned; also one can't be happy without paying. But what does it matter so long as we stick to each other? Soon we shall both be of age and can do what we like."

"One always thinks that, Godfrey, and yet, somehow, one never can. Free will is a fraud in that sense as in every other."

"I have something, as you know, enough with my pay to enable us to get on, even if you were disinherited, dear, though, of course, you could not live as you have been accustomed to do."

"Oh! don't talk to me of money," she said impatiently, "though for the matter of that, I have something, too, a little that comes to me from my mother. Money won't divide us, Godfrey."

"Then what will, Isobel?"

"Nothing in the long run," she answered with conviction, "not even death itself, since in a way we are one and part of each other and therefore cannot be separated for always, whatever happens for a while, as I am sure that something will happen which will make you leave me."

"I swear that I will never leave you, I will die with you first," he exclaimed, springing up.

"Such oaths have been made often and broken--before the dawn," she answered, smiling and shaking her head.

"I swear that I will always love you," he went on.

"Ah! now I believe you, dear!" she broke in again. "However badly you may behave, you will always love me because you must."

"Well, and will you always love me however badly I behave?"

"Of course," she answered simply, "because I must. Oh! whatever we may

hear about each other, we may be quite certain that we still love each other--because we must--and all your heaven and hell cannot make any difference, no, not if they were both to join forces and try their best. But that does not mean that necessarily we shall marry each other, for I think that people who love like that rarely do marry, because, you see, they would be too happy, which something is always trying to prevent. It may mean, however," she added reflectively, "that we shall not marry anybody else, though even that might happen in your case--not in mine. Always remember, Godfrey, that I shall never marry anybody else, not even if you took three wives one after the other."

"Three wives!" gasped Godfrey.

"Yes, why not? It would be quite natural, wouldn't it, if you wouldn't marry me, and even proper. Only I should never take one--husband, I mean--not from any particular virtue, but just because I couldn't. You see, it would make me ill. And if I tried I should only run away."

"Oh! stop talking nonsense," said Godfrey, "when so soon you will have to go to see about those people," and he held out his arms.

She sank into them, and for a little while they forgot their doubts and fears.

The rain had ceased, and the triumphant sun shining gloriously through the west window of stained glass, poured its rays upon them, dyeing

them all the colours of an angel's wings. Also incidentally it made them extremely conspicuous in that dusky church, of which they had all this while forgotten to shut the door.

"My word!" said Sir John to Mr. Knight in tones of savage sarcasm as they surveyed the two through this door. "We've got here just at the right time. Don't they look pretty, and don't you wish that you were his age and that was someone else's daughter? I tell you, I do."

Mr. Knight gurgled something in his inarticulate wrath, for at that moment he hated Isobel's father as much as he did Isobel, which was saying a great deal.

"Well, my pretty pair of cooing turtle-doves," went on Sir John in a sort of shout, addressing himself to them, "be so good as to stop that, or I think I shall wring both your necks, damn you."

"Not in this Holy House, which these infamous and shameless persons have desecrated with their profane embraces," interrupted Mr. Knight.

"Yes, according to your ideas it will be almost a case of re-consecration. You'll have to write to the bishop about it, Mr. Parson. Oh! confound you. Don't stand there like a couple of stuck pigs, but come out of that and let us have a little chat in the

churchyard."

Now, at the first words that reached their ears Godfrey and Isobel had drawn back from each other and stood side by side quite still before the altar, as a pair about to be married might do.

They were dumbfounded, and no wonder. As might be expected Isobel was the first to recover herself.

"Come, my dear," she said in a clear voice to Godfrey, "my father and yours wish to speak to us. I am glad we have a chance of explaining matters so soon."

"Yes," said Godfrey, but in a wrathful voice, for he felt anger stirring in him. Perhaps it was excited by that ancient instinct which causes the male animal to resent the spying upon him when he is courting his female as the deadliest of all possible insults, or perhaps by some prescience of affronts which were about to be offered to him and Isobel by these two whom he knew to be bitterly hostile. At least his temper was rising, and like most rather gentle-natured men when really provoked and cornered, he could be dangerous.

"Yes," he repeated, "let us go out and see this matter through."

So they went, Sir John and Mr. Knight drawing back a little before them, till they were brought to a halt by the horrible memorial which

the former had erected over his wife's grave. Here they stood, prepared for the encounter. Sir John was the first to take the lists, saying:

"Perhaps you will explain, Isobel, why I found you, as I thought, kissing this young fellow--like any village slut beneath a hedge."

Isobel's big eyes grew steely as she answered:

"For the same reason, Father. Like your village slut, I kissed this man because he is my lover whom I mean to marry. If, as I gather, you are not certain as to what you saw, I will kiss him again, here in front of you."

"I have no doubt you will; just like your cheek!" ejaculated Sir John, taken a little aback.

Then Mr. Knight took up the ball, addressing himself to his son:

"Could you find no other place for your immoral performances except the church, Godfrey, and my chancel too?"

"No," answered Godfrey, "because it was raining and we sheltered there. And what do you mean by your talk about immorality? Is it not lawful for a man to love a woman? I should have thought that the Bible, which you are always quoting, would have taught you otherwise. Also, once you were married yourself else I should not be here, for which I am not

sure that I thank you; at least, I shouldn't were it not for Isobel."

For a moment Mr. Knight could think of no answer to these arguments, but Sir John having recovered his breath, attacked again:

"Look here, young fellow, I have no time to listen to jaw about the Bible and moral and immoral and all that bosh, which you can have out with your reverend parent afterwards. I am a plain man, I am, and want a plain answer to a plain question. Do you think that you are going to marry my daughter, Isobel?"

"Such is my desire and intention," replied Godfrey, with vague recollections of the baptismal service, though of these at the moment he was not aware.

"Oh, is it? Then you are jolly well mistaken in your desire and intention. Let's make things clear. You are a beggarly youngster who propose to enter the army at some future date, which you may or may not do. And you have the impudence to wish to marry one of the biggest heiresses in England against my will."

"And against mine," burst in Mr. Knight, "who consider her a most pernicious young woman, one who rejects the Christian faith and will lead you to perdition. That is why, when I chanced to espy you in such a compromising position, I hastened to inform the lady's father."

"Oh! you did that, did you?" interposed Isobel, contemplating him steadily. "Well, I am glad to know who could have been so cowardly," she added with withering contempt. "Now I begin to wonder whether a letter which some years ago, I brought to the Abbey House to be forwarded to Godfrey, was ever posted to him who did not receive it, or whether, perhaps, it fell into the hands of--someone like you."

"It did," said Mr. Knight. "I read it and have it to this day. In my discretion as a father I did not consider it desirable that my young son should receive that letter. What I have witnessed this afternoon shows me how right was my judgment."

"Thank you so much," said Isobel. "That takes a great weight off my mind. Godfrey, my dear, I apologise to you for my doubts. The truth did occur to me, but I thought it impossible that a clergyman," here she looked again at Mr. Knight, "could be a thief also who did not dare to own to his theft."

"Never mind all that," went on Sir John in his heavy, masterful voice.

"It stands like this. You," and he pointed a fat finger at Godfrey, "are--well, I'll tell you what you are--you're just a cunning young fortune-hunter. You found out that this property and a good bit besides are coming to Isobel, and you want to collar the sag, like you did that of the old woman out in Lucerne. Well, you don't do it, my boy. I've other views for Isobel. Do you think I want to see her married to--to--the son of a fellow like that--a canting snuffler who prigs

letters and splits on his own son?" and swinging the fat finger round he thrust it almost into the face of Mr. Knight.

"What did you say?" gasped Godfrey. "That I am a fortune-hunter?"

"Yes, that's what I said, and I'll repeat it if you like."

"Then," went on Godfrey, speaking in a thick, low voice, for now his temper had mastered him thoroughly, "I say that you are a liar. I say that you are a base and vulgar man who has made money somehow and thinks that this justifies him in insulting those who are not base or vulgar, because they have less money."

"You infernal young scamp," shouted Sir John in a roar like to that of an angry bull. "Do you dare to call me a liar? Apologise at once, or----" and he stopped.

"I do not apologise. I repeat that you are a liar, the greatest liar I ever met. Now--or what?"

Thus spoke Godfrey, drawing up his tall, slim young form to its full height, his dark eyes flashing, his fine face alight with righteous rage. Isobel, who was standing quite still and smiling a little, rather contemptuously, looked at him out of the corners of her eyes and thought that anger became him well. Never before had he seemed so handsome to her approving judgment.

"Or this," bellowed Sir John, and, lifting the tightly rolled umbrella he carried, he struck Godfrey with all his strength upon the side of the head.

Godfrey staggered, but fortunately the soft hat he was wearing, upon the brim of which the stroke fell, broke its weight to some extent, so that he was not really hurt. Only now he went quite mad in a kind of icy way, and, springing at Sir John with the lightness of a leopard, dealt him two blows, one with his left hand and the next with his right.

They were good, straight blows, for boxing had been his favourite amusement at Sandhurst where he was a middleweight champion. The first caught Sir John upon his thick lips which were badly cut against the teeth, causing him to stagger; while the second, that with the right, landed on the bridge of his nose and blacked both his eyes. This, so strong and heavy was it, notwithstanding Sir John's great weight, knocked him clean off his feet. Back he went, and in his efforts to save himself gripped Mr. Knight with one hand and with the other the legs of the early Victorian angel that surmounted Lady Jane's grave against which they were standing. Neither of these could withstand the strain. The angel, which was only pinned by lead-coated rivets to its base and the column behind, flew from its supports, as did Mr. Knight from his, so that in another second, the men having tripped against the surround of the grave, all three rolled upon the path, the marble luckily falling clear of both of them.

"Now I've done it," said Godfrey in a reflective voice as he contemplated the tangled ruin.

"Yes," exclaimed Isobel, "I think you have."

Then they remained grim and silent while the pair, who were not really much injured, picked themselves up with groans.

"I am sorry that I knocked you down, since I am young and you are not," said Godfrey, "but I repeat that you are a liar," he added by an afterthought.

Sir John spat out a tooth, and began to mop the blood from his nose with a silk pocket-handkerchief.

"Oh! you do, do you?" he said in a somewhat subdued voice. "Well, you'll find out that I'm other things too before I'm done with you. And I repeat that you are fortune-hunting young rascal and that I would rather see my daughter dead than married to you."

"And I say, Godfrey, I would rather see you dead than married to her!" broke in Mr. Knight, spitting out his words like an angry cat.

"I don't think that you need be afraid, Father," answered Godfrey quietly, although his rage burned as fiercely as ever. "You have worked

this business well, and it seems a little impossible now, doesn't it? Listen, Sir John Blake. Not even for the sake of Isobel will I submit to such insults. I will not give her up, but I swear by God that while you are alive I will not marry Isobel, nor will I write to her or speak to her again. After you are dead, which I dare say will be before so very long," and he surveyed the huge, puffy-fleshed baronet with a critical eye, "then--if she cares to wait for me--I will marry her, hoping that in the meanwhile you may lose your money or dispose of it as you like."

Sir John stared, still mopping his face, but finding no words. He feared death very much and this prophecy of it, spoken with such a ring of truth, as though the speaker knew, frightened him. At that moment in his heart he cursed the Reverend Mr. Knight and his tale-bearing, and wished most earnestly that he had never been led into interference with this matter. After all Godfrey was a fine young man whom his daughter cared for, and might do well in life, and he had struck him first after offering him intentional and pre-arranged insult. Such were the thoughts that flashed through his somewhat muddled brain. Also another, that they were too late. The evil was done and never could be undone.

Then Isobel spoke in cold, clear tones, saying:

"Godfrey is quite right and has been right all through. Had you, Father, and that man," and she pointed contemptuously at Mr. Knight, "left us alone we should have come and told you what had happened

between us, and if you disapproved we would have waited until we were of full age and have married as we should have been free to do. But now that is impossible, for blows have passed between you. After slandering him vilely, you struck Godfrey first, Father, and he would not have been a man if he had not struck you back; indeed I should have thought little of him afterwards. Well, he has made an oath, and I know that he will keep it. Now I, too, make an oath which certainly I shall keep. I swear in the presence of both of you, by myself and by Godfrey, that neither in this world or in any other, should I live again and have remembrance, will I marry any man or exchange tenderesses with any man, except himself. So all your plans come to nothing; yes, you have brought all this misery upon us for nothing, and if you want to found a great family, as I know you do, you had better marry again yourself and let me go my way. In any case, if I should survive you and should Godfrey live, I will marry him after your death, even if we have to wait until we are old to do so. As to your fortune, I care nothing for it, being quite ready to work in the world with the help of the little I have."

She paused as though for an answer, but none came, for if Sir John had been frightened before, now he was terrified of this outraged young woman who, tall, commanding and stern-eyed, looked to him like an avenging angel.

"There doesn't seem much more to say, does there?" she went on, "except that I think, Father, you had better telegraph to your guests that you

are not well and cannot receive them, for I won't. So good-bye, dearest Godfrey. I shall remember all that you have said, and you will remember all that I have said, and as I believe, we shall live to meet again one day. Meanwhile, don't think too bitterly of my father, or of your own, because they have acted according to their natures and lights, though where these will lead them I am sure I do not know. Good-bye, dearest, dearest Godfrey. Do your best in the world and keep out of troubles if you can. Oh! what a lot we shall have to tell each other when we meet again."

Then before them both she kissed him, and he kissed her back, saying:

"I will remember. I am glad you think there was nothing else to be done. God bless you, Isobel. Make the best of your life, as I will try to do with mine. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, dear," she answered, "think of me always when you wake and before you go to sleep, as I will think of you."

Then she turned and went, never looking behind her.

Godfrey watched her tall form vanish through the churchyard gate and over the slope of a little hill that lay between it and Hawk's Hall, and that was the last sight he had of her for many a year. When she was

quite lost to view, he spoke to the two men who still stood irresolute before him.

"Isobel I shall meet again," he said, "but not either of you, for I have done with you both. It is not for me to judge you. Judge yourself and be judged."

Then he turned, too, and went.

"It's all right," said Sir John to Mr. Knight, "that is, he won't marry her, at any rate at present, so I suppose that we should both be pleased, if anyone can be pleased with cut lips and two black eyes. And yet somehow we seem to have made a mess of it," and he glanced at the shattered marble statue of the Victorian angel of which both the wings were broken off.

"We have done our duty," replied Mr. Knight, pursing up his thin lips, "and at least Godfrey is freed from your daughter."

"I'm not so sure of that, my reverend friend. But of one thing I am sure, that I am freed from her also, or rather that she is freed from me. Also you are freed from him. Don't you understand, you vicious little viper, that you will never see that young man again, and that thanks to your cursed advice I shall never see my daughter again, at

least not really? What devil was it that sent you to play upon my weaknesses and ambition? If you had left things alone and they had come to me in a natural way there would have been a row, of course, but I dare say it would have ended all right. But you told me how to work on him and I overdid the part. Now nothing can ever be all right for either of us, or for them either, until we are both dead. Do you understand also that we have made two young people who should have been the supports of our old age desire above everything our deaths because we have given them cause to hate us, and since they are of the sort that keep their word, only by our deaths can they become free, or, at any rate, by mine? Well, it doesn't matter what you understand, you little bigot, but I know what I do."

"I have done my duty," repeated Mr. Knight sullenly, "and I don't care what happens afterwards. 'Fiat justita ruat coelum,'" he added in the Latin tag.

"Oh, yes. Justice may say fie and the sky may be rude, and anything else may happen, but we've dished our lives and theirs, my friend, and--damn you! get out of my sight. Rows I am accustomed to with Isobel and others, but this isn't a row, it's an earthquake; it's a catastrophe, for which I have to thank you. Lord! how my mouth hurts, and I can't see out of my right eye. Talk of a mailed fist, that young beggar has one like a pole-axe. Now I must go to telegraph to all those people. Temporary indisposition, yes--temporary indisposition, that's it. Good-bye, my holy friend. You won't do as much mischief in one day

again in a hurry, spy as hard as you like."

Then Sir John departed, nursing his cut lips with one hand and his broken umbrella with the other.

Mr. Knight watched him go, and said to himself:

"I thought that I disliked the daughter, but the father is worse. Offensive, purse-proud, vulgar beast! How dare he speak to me like that! I'm glad, yes, I'm glad Godfrey knocked him down, though I suppose there will be a scandal. Well, my hands are clean; I have done my duty, and I must not complain if it is unpleasant, since I have dragged Godfrey back from the mouth of the pit. I think I'll take a walk to steady my nerves; it may be as well not to meet Godfrey again just now."