XI. THE EVENTS OF FIVE DAYS

1. NOVEMBER THE TWENTY-NINTH

The search began at dawn, but a quarter past nine o'clock came without bringing any result. Manston ate a little breakfast, and crossed the hollow of the park which intervened between the old and modern manor-houses, to ask for an interview with Miss Aldclyffe.

He met her midway. She was about to pay him a visit of condolence, and to place every man on the estate at his disposal, that the search for any relic of his dead and destroyed wife might not be delayed an instant.

He accompanied her back to the house. At first they conversed as if the death of the poor woman was an event which the husband must of necessity deeply lament; and when all under this head that social form seemed to require had been uttered, they spoke of the material damage done, and of the steps which had better be taken to remedy it.

It was not till both were shut inside her private room that she spoke to him in her blunt and cynical manner. A certain newness of bearing in him, peculiar to the present morning, had hitherto forbidden her this tone: the demeanour of the subject of her favouritism had altered, she could not tell in what way. He was entirely a changed man.

'Are you really sorry for your poor wife, Mr. Manston?' she said.

'Well, I am,' he answered shortly.

'But only as for any human being who has met with a violent death?'

He confessed it--'For she was not a good woman,' he added.

'I should be sorry to say such a thing now the poor creature is dead,' Miss Aldclyffe returned reproachfully.

'Why?' he asked. 'Why should I praise her if she doesn't deserve it? I say exactly what I have often admired Sterne for saying in one of his letters--that neither reason nor Scripture asks us to speak nothing but good of the dead. And now, madam,' he continued, after a short interval of thought, 'I may, perhaps, hope that you will assist me, or rather not thwart me, in endeavouring to win the love of a young lady living about you, one in whom I am much interested already.'

'Cytherea!'

'Yes, Cytherea.'

'You have been loving Cytherea all the while?'

'Yes.'

Surprise was a preface to much agitation in her, which caused her to rise from her seat, and pace to the side of the room. The steward quietly looked on and added, 'I have been loving and still love her.'

She came close up to him, wistfully contemplating his face, one hand moving indecisively at her side.

'And your secret marriage was, then, the true and only reason for that backwardness regarding the courtship of Cytherea, which, they tell me, has been the talk of the village; not your indifference to her attractions.' Her voice had a tone of conviction in it, as well as of inquiry; but none of jealousy.

'Yes,' he said; 'and not a dishonourable one. What held me back was just that one thing--a sense of morality that perhaps, madam, you did not give me credit for.' The latter words were spoken with a mien and tone of pride.

Miss Aldclyffe preserved silence.

'And now,' he went on, 'I may as well say a word in vindication of my conduct lately, at the risk, too, of offending you. My actual motive in submitting to your order that I should send for my late wife, and live with her, was not the mercenary policy of wishing to retain an office which brings me greater comforts than any I have enjoyed before, but

this unquenchable passion for Cytherea. Though I saw the weakness, folly, and even wickedness of it continually, it still forced me to try to continue near her, even as the husband of another woman.'

He waited for her to speak: she did not.

'There's a great obstacle to my making any way in winning Miss Graye's love,' he went on.

'Yes, Edward Springrove,' she said quietly. 'I know it, I did once want to see them married; they have had a slight quarrel, and it will soon be made up again, unless--' she spoke as if she had only half attended to Manston's last statement.

'He is already engaged to be married to somebody else,' said the steward.

'Pooh!' said she, 'you mean to his cousin at Peakhill; that's nothing to help us; he's now come home to break it off.'

'He must not break it off,' said Manston, firmly and calmly.

His tone attracted her, startled her. Recovering herself, she said haughtily, 'Well, that's your affair, not mine. Though my wish has been to see her your wife, I can't do anything dishonourable to bring about such a result.'

'But it must be made your affair,' he said in a hard, steady voice, looking into her eyes, as if he saw there the whole panorama of her past.

One of the most difficult things to portray by written words is that peculiar mixture of moods expressed in a woman's countenance when, after having been sedulously engaged in establishing another's position, she suddenly suspects him of undermining her own. It was thus that Miss Aldclyffe looked at the steward.

'You--know--something--of me?' she faltered.

'I know all,' he said.

'Then curse that wife of yours! She wrote and said she wouldn't tell you!' she burst out. 'Couldn't she keep her word for a day?' She reflected and then said, but no more as to a stranger, 'I will not yield. I have committed no crime. I yielded to her threats in a moment of weakness, though I felt inclined to defy her at the time: it was chiefly because I was mystified as to how she got to know of it. Pooh! I will put up with threats no more. O, can you threaten me?' she added softly, as if she had for the moment forgotten to whom she had been speaking.

'My love must be made your affair,' he repeated, without taking his eyes

from her.

An agony, which was not the agony of being discovered in a secret, obstructed her utterance for a time. 'How can you turn upon me so when I schemed to get you here--schemed that you might win her till I found you were married. O, how can you! O!... O!' She wept; and the weeping of such a nature was as harrowing as the weeping of a man.

'Your getting me here was bad policy as to your secret--the most absurd thing in the world,' he said, not heeding her distress. 'I knew all, except the identity of the individual, long ago. Directly I found that my coming here was a contrived thing, and not a matter of chance, it fixed my attention upon you at once. All that was required was the mere spark of life, to make of a bundle of perceptions an organic whole.'

'Policy, how can you talk of policy? Think, do think! And how can you threaten me when you know--you know--that I would befriend you readily without a threat!'

'Yes, yes, I think you would,' he said more kindly; 'but your indifference for so many, many years has made me doubt it.'

'No, not indifference--'twas enforced silence. My father lived.'

He took her hand, and held it gently.

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'Now listen,' he said, more quietly and humanly, when she had become calmer: 'Springrove must marry the woman he's engaged to. You may make him, but only in one way.'

'Well: but don't speak sternly, AEneas!'

'Do you know that his father has not been particularly thriving for the last two or three years?'

'I have heard something of it, once or twice, though his rents have been promptly paid, haven't they?'

'O yes; and do you know the terms of the leases of the houses which are burnt?' he said, explaining to her that by those terms she might compel him even to rebuild every house. 'The case is the clearest case of fire by negligence that I have ever known, in addition to that,' he continued.

'I don't want them rebuilt; you know it was intended by my father, directly they fell in, to clear the site for a new entrance to the park?'

'Yes, but that doesn't affect the position, which is that Farmer Springrove is in your power to an extent which is very serious for him.'

'I won't do it--'tis a conspiracy.'

'Won't you for me?' he said eagerly.

Miss Aldclyffe changed colour.

'I don't threaten now, I implore,' he said.

'Because you might threaten if you chose,' she mournfully answered. 'But why be so--when your marriage with her was my own pet idea long before it was yours? What must I do?'

'Scarcely anything: simply this. When I have seen old Mr. Springrove, which I shall do in a day or two, and told him that he will be expected to rebuild the houses, do you see the young man. See him yourself, in order that the proposals made may not appear to be anything more than an impulse of your own. You or he will bring up the subject of the houses. To rebuild them would be a matter of at least six hundred pounds, and he will almost surely say that we are hard in insisting upon the extreme letter of the leases. Then tell him that scarcely can you yourself think of compelling an old tenant like his father to any such painful extreme--there shall be no compulsion to build, simply a surrender of the leases. Then speak feelingly of his cousin, as a woman whom you respect and love, and whose secret you have learnt to be that she is heart-sick with hope deferred. Beg him to marry her, his betrothed and

your friend, as some return for your consideration towards his father. Don't suggest too early a day for their marriage, or he will suspect you of some motive beyond womanly sympathy. Coax him to make a promise to her that she shall be his wife at the end of a twelvemonth, and get him, on assenting to this, to write to Cytherea, entirely renouncing her.'

'She has already asked him to do that.'

'So much the better--and telling her, too, that he is about to fulfil his long-standing promise to marry his cousin. If you think it worth while, you may say Cytherea was not indisposed to think of me before she knew I was married. I have at home a note she wrote me the first evening I saw her, which looks rather warm, and which I could show you. Trust me, he will give her up. When he is married to Adelaide Hinton, Cytherea will be induced to marry me--perhaps before; a woman's pride is soon wounded.'

'And hadn't I better write to Mr. Nyttleton, and inquire more particularly what's the law upon the houses?'

'O no, there's no hurry for that. We know well enough how the case stands--quite well enough to talk in general terms about it. And I want the pressure to be put upon young Springrove before he goes away from home again.'

She looked at him furtively, long, and sadly, as after speaking he

became lost in thought, his eyes listlessly tracing the pattern of the carpet. 'Yes, yes, she will be mine,' he whispered, careless of Cytherea Aldclyffe's presence. At last he raised his eyes inquiringly.

'I will do my best, AEneas,' she answered.

Talibus incusat. Manston then left the house, and again went towards the blackened ruins, where men were still raking and probing.

2. FROM NOVEMBER THE TWENTY-NINTH TO DECEMBER THE SECOND

The smouldering remnants of the Three Tranters Inn seemed to promise that, even when the searchers should light upon the remains of the unfortunate Mrs. Manston, very little would be discoverable.

Consisting so largely of the charcoal and ashes of hard dry oak and chestnut, intermingled with thatch, the interior of the heap was one glowing mass of embers, which, on being stirred about, emitted sparks and flame long after it was dead and black on the outside. It was persistently hoped, however, that some traces of the body would survive the effect of the hot coals, and after a search pursued uninterruptedly for thirty hours, under the direction of Manston himself, enough was found to set at rest any doubts of her fate.

The melancholy gleanings consisted of her watch, bunch of keys, a few coins, and two charred and blackened bones.

Two days later the official inquiry into the cause of her death was held at the Rising Sun Inn, before Mr. Floy, the coroner, and a jury of the chief inhabitants of the district. The little tavern--the only remaining one in the village--was crowded to excess by the neighbouring peasantry as well as their richer employers: all who could by any possibility obtain an hour's release from their duties being present as listeners.

The jury viewed the sad and infinitesimal remains, which were folded in a white cambric cloth, and laid in the middle of a well-finished coffin lined with white silk (by Manston's order), which stood in an adjoining room, the bulk of the coffin being completely filled in with carefully arranged flowers and evergreens--also the steward's own doing.

Abraham Brown, of Hoxton, London--an old white-headed man, without the ruddiness which makes white hairs so pleasing--was sworn, and deposed that he kept a lodging-house at an address he named. On a Saturday evening less than a month before the fire, a lady came to him, with very little luggage, and took the front room on the second floor. He did not inquire where she came from, as she paid a week in advance, but she gave her name as Mrs. Manston, referring him, if he wished for any guarantee of her respectability, to Mr. Manston, Knapwater Park. Here she lived for three weeks, rarely going out. She slept away from her lodgings one night during the time. At the end of that time, on the twenty-eighth of November, she left his house in a four-wheeled cab, about twelve o'clock in the day, telling the driver to take her to the Waterloo Station. She

paid all her lodging expenses, and not having given notice the full week previous to her going away, offered to pay for the next, but he only took half. She wore a thick black veil, and grey waterproof cloak, when she left him, and her luggage was two boxes, one of plain deal, with black japanned clamps, the other sewn up in canvas.

Joseph Chinney, porter at the Carriford Road Station, deposed that he saw Mrs. Manston, dressed as the last witness had described, get out of a second-class carriage on the night of the twenty-eighth. She stood beside him whilst her luggage was taken from the van. The luggage, consisting of the clamped deal box and another covered with canvas, was placed in the cloak-room. She seemed at a loss at finding nobody there to meet her. She asked him for some person to accompany her, and carry her bag to Mr. Manston's house, Knapwater Park. He was just off duty at that time, and offered to go himself. The witness here repeated the conversation he had had with Mrs. Manston during their walk, and testified to having left her at the door of the Three Tranters Inn, Mr. Manston's house being closed.

Next, Farmer Springrove was called. A murmur of surprise and commiseration passed round the crowded room when he stepped forward.

The events of the few preceding days had so worked upon his nervously thoughtful nature that the blue orbits of his eyes, and the mere spot of scarlet to which the ruddiness of his cheeks had contracted, seemed the result of a heavy sickness. A perfect silence pervaded the assembly when

he spoke.

His statement was that he received Mrs. Manston at the threshold, and asked her to enter the parlour. She would not do so, and stood in the passage whilst the maid went upstairs to see that the room was in order. The maid came down to the middle landing of the staircase, when Mrs. Manston followed her up to the room. He did not speak ten words with her altogether.

Afterwards, whilst he was standing at the door listening for his son Edward's return, he saw her light extinguished, having first caught sight of her shadow moving about the room.

THE CORONER: 'Did her shadow appear to be that of a woman undressing?'

SPRINGROVE: 'I cannot say, as I didn't take particular notice. It moved backwards and forwards; she might have been undressing or merely pacing up and down the room.'

Mrs. Fitler, the ostler's wife and chambermaid, said that she preceded Mrs. Manston into the room, put down the candle, and went out. Mrs. Manston scarcely spoke to her, except to ask her to bring a little brandy. Witness went and fetched it from the bar, brought it up, and put it on the dressing-table.

THE CORONER: 'Had Mrs. Manston begun to undress, when you came back?'

'No, sir; she was sitting on the bed, with everything on, as when she came in.'

'Did she begin to undress before you left?'

'Not exactly before I had left; but when I had closed the door, and was on the landing I heard her boot drop on the floor, as it does sometimes when pulled off?'

'Had her face appeared worn and sleepy?'

'I cannot say as her bonnet and veil were still on when I left, for she seemed rather shy and ashamed to be seen at the Three Tranters at all.'

'And did you hear or see any more of her?'

'No more, sir.'

Mrs. Crickett, temporary servant to Mr. Manston, said that in accordance with Mr. Manston's orders, everything had been made comfortable in the house for Mrs. Manston's expected return on Monday night. Mr. Manston told her that himself and Mrs. Manston would be home late, not till between eleven and twelve o'clock, and that supper was to be ready. Not

expecting Mrs. Manston so early, she had gone out on a very important errand to Mrs. Leat the postmistress.

Mr. Manston deposed that in looking down the columns of Bradshaw he had mistaken the time of the train's arrival, and hence was not at the station when she came. The broken watch produced was his wife's--he knew it by a scratch on the inner plate, and by other signs. The bunch of keys belonged to her: two of them fitted the locks of her two boxes.

Mr. Flooks, agent to Lord Claydonfield at Chettlewood, said that Mr. Manston had pleaded as his excuse for leaving him rather early in the evening after their day's business had been settled, that he was going to meet his wife at Carriford Road Station, where she was coming by the last train that night.

The surgeon said that the remains were those of a human being. The small fragment seemed a portion of one of the lumbar vertebrae--the other the head of the os femoris--but they were both so far gone that it was impossible to say definitely whether they belonged to the body of a male or female. There was no moral doubt that they were a woman's. He did not believe that death resulted from burning by fire. He thought she was crushed by the fall of the west gable, which being of wood, as well as the floor, burnt after it had fallen, and consumed the body with it.

Two or three additional witnesses gave unimportant testimony.

The coroner summed up, and the jury without hesitation found that the deceased Mrs. Manston came by her death accidentally through the burning of the Three Tranters Inn.

3. DECEMBER THE SECOND. AFTERNOON

When Mr. Springrove came from the door of the Rising Sun at the end of the inquiry, Manston walked by his side as far as the stile to the park, a distance of about a stone's-throw.

'Ah, Mr. Springrove, this is a sad affair for everybody concerned.'

'Everybody,' said the old farmer, with deep sadness, ''tis quite a misery to me. I hardly know how I shall live through each day as it breaks. I think of the words, "In the morning thou shalt say, Would God it were even! and at even thou shalt say, Would God it were morning! for the fear of thine heart wherewith thou shalt fear, and for the sight of thine eyes which thou shalt see."' His voice became broken.

'Ah--true. I read Deuteronomy myself,' said Manston.

'But my loss is as nothing to yours,' the farmer continued.

'Nothing; but I can commiserate you. I should be worse than unfeeling if I didn't, although my own affliction is of so sad and solemn a kind. Indeed my own loss makes me more keenly alive to yours, different in

nature as it is.'

'What sum do you think would be required of me to put the houses in place again?'

'I have roughly thought six or seven hundred pounds.'

'If the letter of the law is to be acted up to,' said the old man, with more agitation in his voice.

'Yes, exactly.'

'Do you know enough of Miss Aldclyffe's mind to give me an idea of how she means to treat me?'

'Well, I am afraid I must tell you that though I know very little of her mind as a rule, in this matter I believe she will be rather peremptory; she might share to the extent of a sixth or an eighth perhaps, in consideration of her getting new lamps for old, but I should hardly think more.'

The steward stepped upon the stile, and Mr. Springrove went along the road with a bowed head and heavy footsteps towards his niece's cottage, in which, rather against the wish of Edward, they had temporarily taken refuge.

The additional weight of this knowledge soon made itself perceptible. Though indoors with Edward or Adelaide nearly the whole of the afternoon, nothing more than monosyllabic replies could be drawn from him. Edward continually discovered him looking fixedly at the wall or floor, quite unconscious of another's presence. At supper he ate just as usual, but quite mechanically, and with the same abstraction.

4. DECEMBER THE THIRD

The next morning he was in no better spirits. Afternoon came: his son was alarmed, and managed to draw from him an account of the conversation
with the steward.

'Nonsense; he knows nothing about it,' said Edward vehemently. 'I'll see Miss Aldclyffe myself. Now promise me, father, that you'll not believe till I come back, and tell you to believe it, that Miss Aldclyffe will do any such unjust thing.'

Edward started at once for Knapwater House. He strode rapidly along the high-road, till he reached a wicket where a footpath allowed of a short cut to the mansion. Here he leant down upon the bars for a few minutes, meditating as to the best manner of opening his speech, and surveying the scene before him in that absent mood which takes cognizance of little things without being conscious of them at the time, though they appear in the eye afterwards as vivid impressions. It was a yellow,

lustrous, late autumn day, one of those days of the quarter when morning and evening seem to meet together without the intervention of a noon. The clear yellow sunlight had tempted forth Miss Aldclyffe herself, who was at this same time taking a walk in the direction of the village. As Springrove lingered he heard behind the plantation a woman's dress brushing along amid the prickly husks and leaves which had fallen into the path from the boughs of the chestnut trees. In another minute she stood in front of him.

He answered her casual greeting respectfully, and was about to request a few minutes' conversation with her, when she directly addressed him on the subject of the fire. 'It is a sad misfortune for your father' she said, 'and I hear that he has lately let his insurances expire?'

'He has, madam, and you are probably aware that either by the general terms of his holding, or the same coupled with the origin of the fire, the disaster may involve the necessity of his rebuilding the whole row of houses, or else of becoming a debtor to the estate, to the extent of some hundreds of pounds?'

She assented. 'I have been thinking of it,' she went on, and then repeated in substance the words put into her mouth by the steward. Some disturbance of thought might have been fancied as taking place in Springrove's mind during her statement, but before she had reached the end, his eyes were clear, and directed upon her.

'I don't accept your conditions of release,' he said.

'They are not conditions exactly.'

'Well, whatever they are not, they are very uncalled-for remarks.'

'Not at all--the houses have been burnt by your family's negligence.'

'I don't refer to the houses--you have of course the best of all rights to speak of that matter; but you, a stranger to me comparatively, have no right at all to volunteer opinions and wishes upon a very delicate subject, which concerns no living beings but Miss Graye, Miss Hinton, and myself.'

Miss Aldclyffe, like a good many others in her position, had plainly not realized that a son of her tenant and inferior could have become an educated man, who had learnt to feel his individuality, to view society from a Bohemian standpoint, far outside the farming grade in Carriford parish, and that hence he had all a developed man's unorthodox opinion about the subordination of classes. And fully conscious of the labyrinth into which he had wandered between his wish to behave honourably in the dilemma of his engagement to his cousin Adelaide and the intensity of his love for Cytherea, Springrove was additionally sensitive to any allusion to the case. He had spoken to Miss Aldclyffe with considerable warmth.

And Miss Aldclyffe was not a woman likely to be far behind any second person in warming to a mood of defiance. It seemed as if she were prepared to put up with a cold refusal, but that her haughtiness resented a criticism of her conduct ending in a rebuke. By this, Manston's discreditable object, which had been made hers by compulsion only, was now adopted by choice. She flung herself into the work.

A fiery man in such a case would have relinquished persuasion and tried palpable force. A fiery woman added unscrupulousness and evolved daring strategy; and in her obstinacy, and to sustain herself as mistress, she descended to an action the meanness of which haunted her conscience to her dying hour.

'I don't quite see, Mr. Springrove,' she said, 'that I am altogether what you are pleased to call a stranger. I have known your family, at any rate, for a good many years, and I know Miss Graye particularly well, and her state of mind with regard to this matter.'

Perplexed love makes us credulous and curious as old women. Edward was willing, he owned it to himself, to get at Cytherea's state of mind, even through so dangerous a medium.

'A letter I received from her' he said, with assumed coldness, 'tells me clearly enough what Miss Graye's mind is.'

'You think she still loves you? O yes, of course you do--all men are

like that.'

'I have reason to.' He could feign no further than the first speech.

'I should be interested in knowing what reason?' she said, with sarcastic archness.

Edward felt he was allowing her to do, in fractional parts, what he rebelled against when regarding it as a whole; but the fact that his antagonist had the presence of a queen, and features only in the early evening of their beauty, was not without its influence upon a keenly conscious man. Her bearing had charmed him into toleration, as Mary Stuart's charmed the indignant Puritan visitors. He again answered her honestly.

'The best of reasons--the tone of her letter.'

'Pooh, Mr. Springrove!'

'Not at all, Miss Aldclyffe! Miss Graye desired that we should be strangers to each other for the simple practical reason that intimacy could only make wretched complications worse, not from lack of love--love is only suppressed.'

'Don't you know yet, that in thus putting aside a man, a woman's pity for the pain she inflicts gives her a kindness of tone which is

often mistaken for suppressed love?' said Miss Aldclyffe, with soft insidiousness.

This was a translation of the ambiguity of Cytherea's tone which he had certainly never thought of; and he was too ingenuous not to own it.

'I had never thought of it,' he said.

'And don't believe it?'

'Not unless there was some other evidence to support the view.'

She paused a minute and then began hesitatingly--

'My intention was--what I did not dream of owning to you--my intention was to try to induce you to fulfil your promise to Miss Hinton not solely on her account and yours (though partly). I love Cytherea Graye with all my soul, and I want to see her happy even more than I do you. I did not mean to drag her name into the affair at all, but I am driven to say that she wrote that letter of dismissal to you--for it was a most pronounced dismissal--not on account of your engagement. She is old enough to know that engagements can be broken as easily as they can be made. She wrote it because she loved another man; very suddenly, and not with any idea or hope of marrying him, but none the less deeply.'

'Who?'

'Mr. Manston.'

'Good--! I can't listen to you for an instant, madam; why, she hadn't seen him!'

'She had; he came here the day before she wrote to you; and I could prove to you, if it were worth while, that on that day she went voluntarily to his house, though not artfully or blamably; stayed for two hours playing and singing; that no sooner did she leave him than she went straight home, and wrote the letter saying she should not see you again, entirely because she had seen him and fallen desperately in love with him--a perfectly natural thing for a young girl to do, considering that he's the handsomest man in the county. Why else should she not have written to you before?'

'Because I was such a--because she did not know of the connection between me and my cousin until then.'

'I must think she did.'

'On what ground?'

'On the strong ground of my having told her so, distinctly, the very first day she came to live with me.'

'Well, what do you seek to impress upon me after all? This--that the day Miss Graye wrote to me, saying it was better that we should part, coincided with the day she had seen a certain man--'

'A remarkably handsome and talented man.'

'Yes, I admit that.'

'And that it coincided with the hour just subsequent to her seeing him.'

'Yes, just when she had seen him.'

'And been to his house alone with him.'

'It is nothing.'

'And stayed there playing and singing with him.'

'Admit that, too,' he said; 'an accident might have caused it.'

'And at the same instant that she wrote your dismissal she wrote a letter referring to a secret appointment with him.'

'Never, by God, madam! never!'

'What do you say, sir?'

'Never.'

She sneered.

'There's no accounting for beliefs, and the whole history is a very trivial matter; but I am resolved to prove that a lady's word is truthful, though upon a matter which concerns neither you nor herself. You shall learn that she did write him a letter concerning an assignation--that is, if Mr. Manston still has it, and will be considerate enough to lend it me.'

'But besides,' continued Edward, 'a married man to do what would cause a young girl to write a note of the kind you mention!'

She flushed a little.

'That I don't know anything about,' she stammered. 'But Cytherea didn't, of course, dream any more than I did, or others in the parish, that he was married.'

'Of course she didn't.'

'And I have reason to believe that he told her of the fact directly afterwards, that she might not compromise herself, or allow him to. It is notorious that he struggled honestly and hard against her

attractions, and succeeded in hiding his feelings, if not in quenching them.'

'We'll hope that he did.'

'But circumstances are changed now.'

'Very greatly changed,' he murmured abstractedly.

'You must remember,' she added more suasively, 'that Miss Graye has a perfect right to do what she likes with her own--her heart, that is to say.'

Her descent from irritation was caused by perceiving that Edward's faith was really disturbed by her strong assertions, and it gratified her.

Edward's thoughts flew to his father, and the object of his interview with her. Tongue-fencing was utterly distasteful to him.

'I will not trouble you by remaining longer, madam,' he remarked, gloomily; 'our conversation has ended sadly for me.'

'Don't think so,' she said, 'and don't be mistaken. I am older than you are, many years older, and I know many things.'

Full of miserable doubt, and bitterly regretting that he had raised his father's expectations by anticipations impossible of fulfilment, Edward slowly went his way into the village, and approached his cousin's house. The farmer was at the door looking eagerly for him. He had been waiting there for more than half-an-hour. His eye kindled quickly.

'Well, Ted, what does she say?' he asked, in the intensely sanguine tones which fall sadly upon a listener's ear, because, antecedently, they raise pictures of inevitable disappointment for the speaker, in some direction or another.

'Nothing for us to be alarmed at,' said Edward, with a forced cheerfulness.

'But must we rebuild?'

'It seems we must, father.'

The old man's eyes swept the horizon, then he turned to go in, without making another observation. All light seemed extinguished in him again. When Edward went in he found his father with the bureau open, unfolding the leases with a shaking hand, folding them up again without reading them, then putting them in their niche only to remove them again.

Adelaide was in the room. She said thoughtfully to Edward, as she watched the farmer--

'I hope it won't kill poor uncle, Edward. What should we do if anything were to happen to him? He is the only near relative you and I have in the world.' It was perfectly true, and somehow Edward felt more bound up with her after that remark.

She continued: 'And he was only saying so hopefully the day before the fire, that he wouldn't for the world let any one else give me away to you when we are married.'

For the first time a conscientious doubt arose in Edward's mind as to the justice of the course he was pursuing in resolving to refuse the alternative offered by Miss Aldclyffe. Could it be selfishness as well as independence? How much he had thought of his own heart, how little he had thought of his father's peace of mind!

The old man did not speak again till supper-time, when he began asking his son an endless number of hypothetical questions on what might induce Miss Aldclyffe to listen to kinder terms; speaking of her now not as an unfair woman, but as a Lachesis or Fate whose course it behoved nobody to condemn. In his earnestness he once turned his eyes on Edward's face: their expression was woful: the pupils were dilated and strange in aspect.

'If she will only agree to that!' he reiterated for the hundredth time, increasing the sadness of his listeners.

An aristocratic knocking came to the door, and Jane entered with a letter, addressed--

'MR. EDWARD SPRINGROVE, Junior.'

'Charles from Knapwater House brought it,' she said.

'Miss Aldclyffe's writing,' said Mr. Springrove, before Edward had recognized it himself. 'Now 'tis all right; she's going to make an offer; she doesn't want the houses there, not she; they are going to make that the way into the park.'

Edward opened the seal and glanced at the inside. He said, with a supreme effort of self-command--

'It is only directed by Miss Aldclyffe, and refers to nothing connected with the fire. I wonder at her taking the trouble to send it to-night.'

His father looked absently at him and turned away again. Shortly afterwards they retired for the night. Alone in his bedroom Edward opened and read what he had not dared to refer to in their presence.

The envelope contained another envelope in Cytherea's handwriting, addressed to '---- Manston, Esq., Old Manor House.' Inside this was the note she had written to the steward after her detention in his house by

the thunderstorm--

'KNAPWATER HOUSE,

September 20th.

'I find I cannot meet you at seven o'clock by the waterfall as I promised. The emotion I felt made me forgetful of realities.
'C. GRAYE.'

Miss Aldclyffe had not written a line, and, by the unvarying rule observable when words are not an absolute necessity, her silence seemed ten times as convincing as any expression of opinion could have been.

He then, step by step, recalled all the conversation on the subject of Cytherea's feelings that had passed between himself and Miss Aldclyffe in the afternoon, and by a confusion of thought, natural enough under the trying experience, concluded that because the lady was truthful in her portraiture of effects, she must necessarily be right in her assumption of causes. That is, he was convinced that Cytherea--the hitherto-believed faithful Cytherea--had, at any rate, looked with something more than indifference upon the extremely handsome face and form of Manston.

Did he blame her, as guilty of the impropriety of allowing herself to

love the newcomer in the face of his not being free to return her love? No; never for a moment did he doubt that all had occurred in her old, innocent, impulsive way; that her heart was gone before she knew it--before she knew anything, beyond his existence, of the man to whom it had flown. Perhaps the very note enclosed to him was the result of first reflection. Manston he would unhesitatingly have called a scoundrel, but for one strikingly redeeming fact. It had been patent to the whole parish, and had come to Edward's own knowledge by that indirect channel, that Manston, as a married man, conscientiously avoided Cytherea after those first few days of his arrival during which her irresistibly beautiful and fatal glances had rested upon him--his upon her.

Taking from his coat a creased and pocket-worn envelope containing Cytherea's letter to himself, Springrove opened it and read it through. He was upbraided therein, and he was dismissed. It bore the date of the letter sent to Manston, and by containing within it the phrase, 'All the day long I have been thinking,' afforded justifiable ground for assuming that it was written subsequently to the other (and in Edward's sight far sweeter one) to the steward.

But though he accused her of fickleness, he would not doubt the genuineness, in its kind, of her partiality for him at Budmouth. It was a short and shallow feeling--not perfect love:

'Love is not love

Which alters when it alteration finds.'

But it was not flirtation; a feeling had been born in her and had died. It would be well for his peace of mind if his love for her could flit away so softly, and leave so few traces behind.

Miss Aldclyffe had shown herself desperately concerned in the whole matter by the alacrity with which she had obtained the letter from Manston, and her labours to induce himself to marry his cousin. Taken in connection with her apparent interest in, if not love for, Cytherea, her eagerness, too, could only be accounted for on the ground that Cytherea indeed loved the steward.

5. DECEMBER THE FOURTH

Edward passed the night he scarcely knew how, tossing feverishly from side to side, the blood throbbing in his temples, and singing in his ears.

Before the day began to break he dressed himself. On going out upon the landing he found his father's bedroom door already open. Edward concluded that the old man had risen softly, as was his wont, and gone out into the fields to start the labourers. But neither of the outer doors was unfastened. He entered the front room, and found it empty. Then animated by a new idea, he went round to the little back parlour, in which the few wrecks saved from the fire were deposited, and looked

in at the door. Here, near the window, the shutters of which had been opened half way, he saw his father leaning on the bureau, his elbows resting on the flap, his body nearly doubled, his hands clasping his forehead. Beside him were ghostly-looking square folds of parchment--the leases of the houses destroyed.

His father looked up when Edward entered, and wearily spoke to the young man as his face came into the faint light.

'Edward, why did you get up so early?'

'I was uneasy, and could not sleep.'

The farmer turned again to the leases on the bureau, and seemed to become lost in reflection. In a minute or two, without lifting his eyes, he said--

'This is more than we can bear, Ted--more than we can bear! Ted, this will kill me. Not the loss only--the sense of my neglect about the insurance and everything. Borrow I never will. 'Tis all misery now. God help us--all misery now!'

Edward did not answer, continuing to look fixedly at the dreary daylight outside.

'Ted,' the farmer went on, 'this upset of be-en burnt out o' home makes

me very nervous and doubtful about everything. There's this troubles me besides--our liven here with your cousin, and fillen up her house. It must be very awkward for her. But she says she doesn't mind. Have you said anything to her lately about when you are going to marry her?'

'Nothing at all lately.'

'Well, perhaps you may as well, now we are so mixed in together. You know, no time has ever been mentioned to her at all, first or last, and I think it right that now, since she has waited so patiently and so long--you are almost called upon to say you are ready. It would simplify matters very much, if you were to walk up to church wi' her one of these mornings, get the thing done, and go on liven here as we are. If you don't I must get a house all the sooner. It would lighten my mind, too, about the two little freeholds over the hill--not a morsel a-piece, divided as they were between her mother and me, but a tidy bit tied together again. Just think about it, will ye, Ted?'

He stopped from exhaustion produced by the intense concentration of his mind upon the weary subject, and looked anxiously at his son.

'Yes, I will,' said Edward.

'But I am going to see her of the Great House this morning,' the farmer went on, his thoughts reverting to the old subject. 'I must know the rights of the matter, the when and the where. I don't like seeing her,

but I'd rather talk to her than the steward. I wonder what she'll say to me.'

The younger man knew exactly what she would say. If his father asked her what he was to do, and when, she would simply refer him to Manston: her character was not that of a woman who shrank from a proposition she had once laid down. If his father were to say to her that his son had at last resolved to marry his cousin within the year, and had given her a promise to that effect, she would say, 'Mr. Springrove, the houses are burnt: we'll let them go: trouble no more about them.'

His mind was already made up. He said calmly, 'Father, when you are talking to Miss Aldclyffe, mention to her that I have asked Adelaide if she is willing to marry me next Christmas. She is interested in my union with Adelaide, and the news will be welcome to her.'

'And yet she can be iron with reference to me and her property,' the farmer murmured. 'Very well, Ted, I'll tell her.'

6. DECEMBER THE FIFTH

Of the many contradictory particulars constituting a woman's heart, two had shown their vigorous contrast in Cytherea's bosom just at this time.

It was a dark morning, the morning after old Mr. Springrove's visit to Miss Aldclyffe, which had terminated as Edward had intended. Having

risen an hour earlier than was usual with her, Cytherea sat at the window of an elegant little sitting-room on the ground floor, which had been appropriated to her by the kindness or whim of Miss Aldclyffe, that she might not be driven into that lady's presence against her will. She leant with her face on her hand, looking out into the gloomy grey air. A yellow glimmer from the flapping flame of the newly-lit fire fluttered on one side of her face and neck like a butterfly about to settle there, contrasting warmly with the other side of the same fair face, which received from the window the faint cold morning light, so weak that her shadow from the fire had a distinct outline on the window-shutter in spite of it. There the shadow danced like a demon, blue and grim.

The contradiction alluded to was that in spite of the decisive mood which two months earlier in the year had caused her to write a peremptory and final letter to Edward, she was now hoping for some answer other than the only possible one a man who, as she held, did not love her wildly, could send to such a communication. For a lover who did love wildly, she had left one little loophole in her otherwise straightforward epistle. Why she expected the letter on some morning of this particular week was, that hearing of his return to Carriford, she fondly assumed that he meant to ask for an interview before he left. Hence it was, too, that for the last few days, she had not been able to keep in bed later than the time of the postman's arrival.

The clock pointed to half-past seven. She saw the postman emerge from beneath the bare boughs of the park trees, come through the wicket, dive

through the shrubbery, reappear on the lawn, stalk across it without reference to paths--as country postmen do--and come to the porch. She heard him fling the bag down on the seat, and turn away towards the village, without hindering himself for a single pace.

Then the butler opened the door, took up the bag, brought it in, and carried it up the staircase to place it on the slab by Miss Aldclyffe's dressing-room door. The whole proceeding had been depicted by sounds.

She had a presentiment that her letter was in the bag at last. She thought then in diminishing pulsations of confidence, 'He asks to see me! Perhaps he asks to see me: I hope he asks to see me.'

A quarter to eight: Miss Aldclyffe's bell--rather earlier than usual. 'She must have heard the post-bag brought,' said the maiden, as, tired of the chilly prospect outside, she turned to the fire, and drew imaginative pictures of her future therein.

A tap came to the door, and the lady's-maid entered.

'Miss Aldclyffe is awake,' she said; 'and she asked if you were moving yet, miss.'

'I'll run up to her,' said Cytherea, and flitted off with the utterance of the words. 'Very fortunate this,' she thought; 'I shall see what is in the bag this morning all the sooner.'

She took it up from the side table, went into Miss Aldclyffe's bedroom, pulled up the blinds, and looked round upon the lady in bed, calculating the minutes that must elapse before she looked at her letters.

'Well, darling, how are you? I am glad you have come in to see me,' said Miss Aldclyffe. 'You can unlock the bag this morning, child, if you like,' she continued, yawning factitiously.

'Strange!' Cytherea thought; 'it seems as if she knew there was likely to be a letter for me.'

From her bed Miss Aldclyffe watched the girl's face as she tremblingly opened the post-bag and found there an envelope addressed to her in Edward's handwriting; one he had written the day before, after the decision he had come to on an impartial, and on that account torturing, survey of his own, his father's, his cousin Adelaide's, and what he believed to be Cytherea's, position.

The haughty mistress's soul sickened remorsefully within her when she saw suddenly appear upon the speaking countenance of the young lady before her a wan desolate look of agony.

The master-sentences of Edward's letter were these: 'You speak truly. That we never meet again is the wisest and only proper course. That I regret the past as much as you do yourself, it is hardly necessary for

me to say.'