

themselves for the night, arranging to go to Budmouth by the first train the next day.

At this hour Edward Springrove was fast approaching his native county on the wheels of the night-mail.

XIV. THE EVENTS OF FIVE WEEKS

1. FROM THE SIXTH TO THE THIRTEENTH OF JANUARY

Manston had evidently resolved to do nothing in a hurry.

This much was plain, that his earnest desire and intention was to raise in Cytherea's bosom no feelings of permanent aversion to him. The instant after the first burst of disappointment had escaped him in the hotel at Southampton, he had seen how far better it would be to lose her presence for a week than her respect for ever.

'She shall be mine; I will claim the young thing yet,' he insisted. And then he seemed to reason over methods for compassing that object, which, to all those who were in any degree acquainted with the recent event, appeared the least likely of possible contingencies.

He returned to Knapwater late the next day, and was preparing to call on Miss Aldclyffe, when the conclusion forced itself upon him that nothing would be gained by such a step. No; every action of his should be done openly--even religiously. At least, he called on the rector, and stated this to be his resolve.

'Certainly,' said Mr. Raunham, 'it is best to proceed candidly and fairly, or undue suspicion may fall on you. You should, in my opinion, take active steps at once.'

'I will do the utmost that lies in my power to clear up the mystery, and silence the hubbub of gossip that has been set going about me. But what can I do? They say that the man who comes first in the chain of inquiry is not to be found--I mean the porter.'

'I am sorry to say that he is not. When I returned from the station last night, after seeing Owen Graye off, I went again to the cottage where he has been lodging, to get more intelligence, as I thought. He was not there. He had gone out at dusk, saying he would be back soon. But he has not come back yet.'

'I rather doubt if we shall see him again.'

'Had I known of this, I would have done what in my flurry I did not think of doing--set a watch upon him. But why not advertise for your missing wife as a preliminary, consulting your solicitor in the

meantime?'

'Advertise. I'll think about it,' said Manston, lingering on the word as he pronounced it. 'Yes, that seems a right thing--quite a right thing.'

He went home and remained moodily indoors all the next day and the next--for nearly a week, in short. Then, one evening at dusk, he went out with an uncertain air as to the direction of his walk, which resulted, however, in leading him again to the rectory.

He saw Mr. Raunham. 'Have you done anything yet?' the rector inquired.

'No--I have not,' said Manston absently. 'But I am going to set about it.' He hesitated, as if ashamed of some weakness he was about to betray. 'My object in calling was to ask if you had heard any tidings from Budmouth of my--Cytherea. You used to speak of her as one you were interested in.'

There was, at any rate, real sadness in Manston's tone now, and the rector paused to weigh his words ere he replied.

'I have not heard directly from her,' he said gently. 'But her brother has communicated with some people in the parish--'

'The Springroves, I suppose,' said Manston gloomily.

'Yes; and they tell me that she is very ill, and I am sorry to say, likely to be for some days.'

'Surely, surely, I must go and see her!' Manston cried.

'I would advise you not to go,' said Raunham. 'But do this instead--be as quick as you can in making a movement towards ascertaining the truth as regards the existence of your wife. You see, Mr. Manston, an out-step place like this is not like a city, and there is nobody to busy himself for the good of the community; whilst poor Cytherea and her brother are socially too dependent to be able to make much stir in the matter, which is a greater reason still why you should be disinterestedly prompt.'

The steward murmured an assent. Still there was the same indecision!--not the indecision of weakness--the indecision of conscious perplexity.

On Manston's return from this interview at the rectory, he passed the door of the Rising Sun Inn. Finding he had no light for his cigar, and it being three-quarters of a mile to his residence in the park, he entered the tavern to get one. Nobody was in the outer portion of the front room where Manston stood, but a space round the fire was screened off from the remainder, and inside the high oak settle, forming a part of the screen, he heard voices conversing. The speakers had not noticed his footsteps, and continued their discourse.

One of the two he recognized as a well-known night-poacher, the man who had met him with tidings of his wife's death on the evening of the conflagration. The other seemed to be a stranger following the same mode of life. The conversation was carried on in the emphatic and confidential tone of men who are slightly intoxicated, its subject being an unaccountable experience that one of them had had on the night of the fire.

What the steward heard was enough, and more than enough, to lead him to forget or to renounce his motive in entering. The effect upon him was strange and strong. His first object seemed to be to escape from the house again without being seen or heard.

Having accomplished this, he went in at the park gate, and strode off under the trees to the Old House. There sitting down by the fire, and burying himself in reflection, he allowed the minutes to pass by unheeded. First the candle burnt down in its socket and stunk: he did not notice it. Then the fire went out: he did not see it. His feet grew cold; still he thought on.

It may be remarked that a lady, a year and a quarter before this time, had, under the same conditions--an unrestricted mental absorption--shown nearly the same peculiarities as this man evinced now. The lady was Miss Aldclyffe.

It was half-past twelve when Manston moved, as if he had come to a

determination.

The first thing he did the next morning was to call at Knapwater House; where he found that Miss Aldclyffe was not well enough to see him. She had been ailing from slight internal haemorrhage ever since the confession of the porter Chinney. Apparently not much aggrieved at the denial, he shortly afterwards went to the railway-station and took his departure for London, leaving a letter for Miss Aldclyffe, stating the reason of his journey thither--to recover traces of his missing wife.

During the remainder of the week paragraphs appeared in the local and other newspapers, drawing attention to the facts of this singular case. The writers, with scarcely an exception, dwelt forcibly upon a feature which had at first escaped the observation of the villagers, including Mr. Raunham--that if the announcement of the man Chinney were true, it seemed extremely probable that Mrs. Manston left her watch and keys behind on purpose to blind people as to her escape; and that therefore she would not now let herself be discovered, unless a strong pressure were put upon her. The writers added that the police were on the track of the porter, who very possibly had absconded in the fear that his reticence was criminal, and that Mr. Manston, the husband, was, with praiseworthy energy, making every effort to clear the whole matter up.

2. FROM THE EIGHTEENTH TO THE END OF JANUARY

Five days from the time of his departure, Manston returned from London

and Liverpool, looking very fatigued and thoughtful. He explained to the rector and other of his acquaintance that all the inquiries he had made at his wife's old lodgings and his own had been totally barren of results.

But he seemed inclined to push the affair to a clear conclusion now that he had commenced. After the lapse of another day or two he proceeded to fulfil his promise to the rector, and advertised for the missing woman in three of the London papers. The advertisement was a carefully considered and even attractive effusion, calculated to win the heart, or at least the understanding, of any woman who had a spark of her own nature left in her.

There was no answer.

Three days later he repeated the experiment; with the same result as before.

'I cannot try any further,' said Manston speciously to the rector, his sole auditor throughout the proceedings. 'Mr. Raunham, I'll tell you the truth plainly: I don't love her; I do love Cytherea, and the whole of this business of searching for the other woman goes altogether against me. I hope to God I shall never see her again.'

'But you will do your duty at least?' said Mr. Raunham.

'I have done it,' said Manston. 'If ever a man on the face of this earth has done his duty towards an absent wife, I have towards her--living or dead--at least,' he added, correcting himself, 'since I have lived at Knapwater. I neglected her before that time--I own that, as I have owned it before.'

'I should, if I were you, adopt other means to get tidings of her if advertising fails, in spite of my feelings,' said the rector emphatically. 'But at any rate, try advertising once more. There's a satisfaction in having made any attempt three several times.'

When Manston had left the study, the rector stood looking at the fire for a considerable length of time, lost in profound reflection. He went to his private diary, and after many pauses, which he varied only by dipping his pen, letting it dry, wiping it on his sleeve, and then dipping it again, he took the following note of events:--

'January 25.--Mr. Manston has just seen me for the third time on the subject of his lost wife. There have been these peculiarities attending the three interviews:--

'The first. My visitor, whilst expressing by words his great anxiety to do everything for her recovery, showed plainly by his bearing that he was convinced he should never see her again.

'The second. He had left off feigning anxiety to do rightly by his first wife, and honestly asked after Cytherea's welfare.

'The third (and most remarkable). He seemed to have lost all consistency. Whilst expressing his love for Cytherea (which certainly is strong) and evincing the usual indifference to the first Mrs. Manston's fate, he was unable to conceal the intensity of his eagerness for me to advise him to advertise again for her.'

A week after the second, the third advertisement was inserted. A paragraph was attached, which stated that this would be the last time the announcement would appear.

3. THE FIRST OF FEBRUARY

At this, the eleventh hour, the postman brought a letter for Manston, directed in a woman's hand.

A bachelor friend of the steward's, Mr. Dickson by name, who was somewhat of a chatterer--plenus rimarum--and who boasted of an endless string of acquaintances, had come over from Casterbridge the preceding day by invitation--an invitation which had been a pleasant surprise to Dickson himself, insomuch that Manston, as a rule, voted him a bore almost to his face. He had stayed over the night, and was sitting at breakfast with his host when the important missive arrived.

Manston did not attempt to conceal the subject of the letter, or the name of the writer. First glancing the pages through, he read aloud as follows:--

"MY HUSBAND,--I implore your forgiveness.

"During the last thirteen months I have repeated to myself a hundred times that you should never discover what I voluntarily tell you now, namely, that I am alive and in perfect health.

"I have seen all your advertisements. Nothing but your persistence has won me round. Surely, I thought, he must love me still. Why else should he try to win back a woman who, faithful unto death as she will be, can, in a social sense, aid him towards acquiring nothing?--rather the reverse, indeed.

"You yourself state my own mind--that the only grounds upon which we can meet and live together, with a reasonable hope of happiness, must be a mutual consent to bury in oblivion all past differences. I heartily and willingly forget everything--and forgive everything. You will do the same, as your actions show.

"There will be plenty of opportunity for me to explain the few facts relating to my escape on the night of the fire. I will only give the

heads in this hurried note. I was grieved at your not coming to fetch me, more grieved at your absence from the station, most of all by your absence from home. On my journey to the inn I writhed under a passionate sense of wrong done me. When I had been shown to my room I waited and hoped for you till the landlord had gone upstairs to bed. I still found that you did not come, and then I finally made up my mind to leave. I had half undressed, but I put on my things again, forgetting my watch (and I suppose dropping my keys, though I am not sure where) in my hurry, and slipped out of the house. The--"

'Well, that's a rum story,' said Mr. Dickson, interrupting.

'What's a rum story?' said Manston hastily, and flushing in the face.

'Forgetting her watch and dropping her keys in her hurry.'

'I don't see anything particularly wonderful in it. Any woman might do such a thing.'

'Any woman might if escaping from fire or shipwreck, or any such immediate danger. But it seems incomprehensible to me that any woman in her senses, who quietly decides to leave a house, should be so forgetful.'

'All that is required to reconcile your seeming with her facts is to

assume that she was not in her senses, for that's what she did plainly, or how could the things have been found there? Besides, she's truthful enough.' He spoke eagerly and peremptorily.

'Yes, yes, I know that. I merely meant that it seemed rather odd.'

'O yes.' Manston read on:--

"--and slipped out of the house. The rubbish-heap was burning up brightly, but the thought that the house was in danger did not strike me; I did not consider that it might be thatched.

"I idled in the lane behind the wood till the last down-train had come in, not being in a mood to face strangers. Whilst I was there the fire broke out, and this perplexed me still more. However, I was still determined not to stay in the place. I went to the railway-station, which was now quiet, and inquired of the solitary man on duty there concerning the trains. It was not till I had left the man that I saw the effect the fire might have on my history. I considered also, though not in any detailed manner, that the event, by attracting the attention of the village to my former abode, might set people on my track should they doubt my death, and a sudden dread of having to go back again to Knapwater--a place which had seemed inimical to me from first to last--prompted me to run back and bribe the porter to secrecy. I then walked on to Anglebury, lingering about the outskirts of the town till

the morning train came in, when I proceeded by it to London, and then took these lodgings, where I have been supporting myself ever since by needlework, endeavouring to save enough money to pay my passage home to America, but making melancholy progress in my attempt. However, all that is changed--can I be otherwise than happy at it? Of course not. I am happy. Tell me what I am to do, and believe me still to be your faithful wife, EUNICE.

"My name here is (as before)

"MRS. RONDLEY, and my address,
79 ADDINGTON STREET,
LAMBETH."

The name and address were written on a separate slip of paper.

'So it's to be all right at last then,' said Manston's friend. 'But after all there's another woman in the case. You don't seem very sorry for the little thing who is put to such distress by this turn of affairs? I wonder you can let her go so coolly.' The speaker was looking out between the mullions of the window--noticing that some of the lights were glazed in lozenges, some in squares--as he said the words, otherwise he would have seen the passionate expression of agonized hopelessness that flitted across the steward's countenance when the remark was made. He did not see it, and Manston answered after a short

interval. The way in which he spoke of the young girl who had believed herself his wife, whom, a few short days ago, he had openly idolized, and whom, in his secret heart, he idolized still, as far as such a form of love was compatible with his nature, showed that from policy or otherwise, he meant to act up to the requirements of the position into which fate appeared determined to drive him.

'That's neither here nor there,' he said; 'it is a point of honour to do as I am doing, and there's an end of it.'

'Yes. Only I thought you used not to care overmuch about your first bargain.'

'I certainly did not at one time. One is apt to feel rather weary of wives when they are so devilish civil under all aspects, as she used to be. But anything for a change--Abigail is lost, but Michal is recovered. You would hardly believe it, but she seems in fancy to be quite another bride--in fact, almost as if she had really risen from the dead, instead of having only done so virtually.'

'You let the young pink one know that the other has come or is coming?'

'Cui bono?' The steward meditated critically, showing a portion of his intensely wide and regular teeth within the ruby lips.

'I cannot say anything to her that will do any good,' he resumed. 'It

would be awkward--either seeing or communicating with her again. The best plan to adopt will be to let matters take their course--she'll find it all out soon enough.'

Manston found himself alone a few minutes later. He buried his face in his hands, and murmured, 'O my lost one! O my Cytherea! That it should come to this is hard for me! 'Tis now all darkness--"a land of darkness as darkness itself; and of the shadow of death without any order, and where the light is as darkness.'"

Yes, the artificial bearing which this extraordinary man had adopted before strangers ever since he had overheard the conversation at the inn, left him now, and he mourned for Cytherea aloud.

4. THE TWELFTH OF FEBRUARY

Knapwater Park is the picture--at eleven o'clock on a muddy, quiet, hazy, but bright morning--a morning without any blue sky, and without any shadows, the earth being enlivened and lit up rather by the spirit of an invisible sun than by its bodily presence.

The local Hunt had met for the day's sport on the open space of ground immediately in front of the steward's residence--called in the list of appointments, 'Old House, Knapwater'--the meet being here once every season, for the pleasure of Miss Aldclyffe and her friends.

Leaning out from one of the first-floor windows, and surveying with the keenest interest the lively picture of pink and black coats, rich-coloured horses, and sparkling bits and spurs, was the returned and long-lost woman, Mrs. Manston.

The eyes of those forming the brilliant group were occasionally turned towards her, showing plainly that her adventures were the subject of conversation equally with or more than the chances of the coming day. She did not flush beneath their scrutiny; on the contrary, she seemed rather to enjoy it, her eyes being kindled with a light of contented exultation, subdued to square with the circumstances of her matronly position.

She was, at the distance from which they surveyed her, an attractive woman--comely as the tents of Kedar. But to a close observer it was palpable enough that God did not do all the picture. Appearing at least seven years older than Cytherea, she was probably her senior by double the number, the artificial means employed to heighten the natural good appearance of her face being very cleverly applied. Her form was full and round, its voluptuous maturity standing out in strong contrast to the memory of Cytherea's lissom girliness.

It seems to be an almost universal rule that a woman who once has courted, or who eventually will court, the society of men on terms dangerous to her honour cannot refrain from flinging the meaning glance whenever the moment arrives in which the glance is strongly asked

for, even if her life and whole future depended upon that moment's abstinence.

Had a cautious, uxorious husband seen in his wife's countenance what might now have been seen in this dark-eyed woman's as she caught a stray glance of flirtation from one or other of the red-coated gallants outside, he would have passed many days in an agony of restless jealousy and doubt. But Manston was not such a husband, and he was, moreover, calmly attending to his business at the other end of the manor.

The steward had fetched home his wife in the most matter-of-fact way a few days earlier, walking round the village with her the very next morning--at once putting an end, by this simple solution, to all the riddling inquiries and surmises that were rank in the village and its neighbourhood. Some men said that this woman was as far inferior to Cytherea as earth to heaven; others, older and sager, thought Manston better off with such a wife than he would have been with one of Cytherea's youthful impulses, and inexperience in household management. All felt their curiosity dying out of them. It was the same in Carriford as in other parts of the world--immediately circumstantial evidence became exchanged for direct, the loungers in court yawned, gave a final survey, and turned away to a subject which would afford more scope for speculation.