

XV. THE EVENTS OF THREE WEEKS

1. FROM THE TWELFTH OF FEBRUARY TO THE SECOND OF MARCH

Owen Graye's recovery from the illness that had incapacitated him for so long a time was, professionally, the dawn of a brighter prospect for him in every direction, though the change was at first very gradual, and his movements and efforts were little more than mechanical. With the lengthening of the days, and the revival of building operations for the forthcoming season, he saw himself, for the first time, on a road which, pursued with care, would probably lead to a comfortable income at some future day. But he was still very low down the hill as yet.

The first undertaking entrusted to him in the new year began about a month after his return from Southampton. Mr. Gradfield had come back to him in the wake of his restored health, and offered him the superintendence, as clerk of works, of a church which was to be nearly rebuilt at the village of Tolchurch, fifteen or sixteen miles from Budmouth, and about half that distance from Carriford.

'I am now being paid at the rate of a hundred and fifty pounds a year,' he said to his sister in a burst of thankfulness, 'and you shall never, Cytherea, be at any tyrannous lady's beck and call again as long as I live. Never pine or think about what has happened, dear; it's no disgrace to you. Cheer up; you'll be somebody's happy wife yet.'

He did not say Edward Springrove's, for, greatly to his disappointment, a report had reached his ears that the friend to whom Cytherea owed so much had been about to pack up his things and sail for Australia. However, this was before the uncertainty concerning Mrs. Manston's existence had been dispersed by her return, a phenomenon that altered the cloudy relationship in which Cytherea had lately been standing towards her old lover, to one of distinctness; which result would have been delightful but for circumstances about to be mentioned.

Cytherea was still pale from her recent illness, and still greatly dejected. Until the news of Mrs. Manston's return had reached them, she had kept herself closely shut up during the day-time, never venturing forth except at night. Sleeping and waking she had been in perpetual dread lest she should still be claimed by a man whom, only a few weeks earlier, she had regarded in the light of a future husband with quiet assent, not unmixed with cheerfulness.

But the removal of the uneasiness in this direction--by Mrs. Manston's arrival, and her own consequent freedom--had been the imposition of pain in another. Utterly fictitious details of the finding of Cytherea and Manston had been invented and circulated, unavoidably reaching her ears in the course of time. Thus the freedom brought no happiness, and it seemed well-nigh impossible that she could ever again show herself the sparkling creature she once had been--

'Apt to entice a deity.'

On this account, and for the first time in his life, Owen made a point of concealing from her the real state of his feelings with regard to the unhappy transaction. He writhed in secret under the humiliation to which they had been subjected, till the resentment it gave rise to, and for which there was no vent, was sometimes beyond endurance; it induced a mood that did serious damage to the material and plodding perseverance necessary if he would secure permanently the comforts of a home for them.

They gave up their lodgings at Budmouth, and went to Tolchurch as soon as the work commenced.

Here they were domiciled in one half of an old farmhouse, standing not far from the ivy-covered church tower (which was all that was to remain of the original structure). The long steep roof of this picturesque dwelling sloped nearly down to the ground, the old tiles that covered it being overgrown with rich olive-hued moss. New red tiles in twos and threes had been used for patching the holes wrought by decay, lighting up the whole harmonious surface with dots of brilliant scarlet.

The chief internal features of this snug abode were a wide fireplace, enormous cupboards, a brown settle, and several sketches on the wood mantel, done in outline with the point of a hot poker--the subjects mainly consisting of old men walking painfully erect, with a

curly-tailed dog behind.

After a week or two of residence in Tolchurch, and rambles amid the quaint scenery circumscribing it, a tranquillity began to spread itself through the mind of the maiden, which Graye hoped would be a preface to her complete restoration. She felt ready and willing to live the whole remainder of her days in the retirement of their present quarters: she began to sing about the house in low tremulous snatches--

"--I said, if there's peace to be found in the world,
A heart that is humble may hope for it here."

2. THE THIRD OF MARCH

Her convalescence had arrived at this point on a certain evening towards the end of the winter, when Owen had come in from the building hard by, and was changing his muddy boots for slippers, previously to sitting down to toast and tea.

A prolonged though quiet knocking came to the door.

The only person who ever knocked at their door in that way was the new vicar, the prime mover in the church-building. But he was that evening dining with the Squire.

Cytherea was uneasy at the sound--she did not know why, unless it was

because her nerves were weakened by the sickness she had undergone. Instead of opening the door she ran out of the room, and upstairs.

'What nonsense, Cytherea!' said her brother, going to the door.

Edward Springrove stood in the grey light outside.

'Capital--not gone to Australia, and not going, of course!' cried Owen.

'What's the use of going to such a place as that?--I never believed that you would.'

'I am going back to London again to-morrow,' said Springrove, 'and I called to say a word before going. Where is... ?'

'She has just run upstairs. Come in--never mind scraping your shoes--we are regular cottagers now; stone floor, yawning chimney-corner, and all, you see.'

'Mrs. Manston came,' said Edward awkwardly, when he had sat down in the chimney-corner by preference.

'Yes.' At mention of one of his skeletons Owen lost his blitheness at once, and fell into a reverie.

'The history of her escape is very simple.'

'Very.'

'You know I always had wondered, when my father was telling any of the circumstances of the fire to me, how it could be that a woman could sleep so soundly as to be unaware of her horrid position till it was too late even to give shout or sound of any kind.'

'Well, I think that would have been possible, considering her long wearisome journey. People have often been suffocated in their beds before they awoke. But it was hardly likely a body would be completely burnt to ashes as this was assumed to be, though nobody seemed to see it at the time. And how positive the surgeon was too, about those bits of bone! Why he should have been so, nobody can tell. I cannot help saying that if it has ever been possible to find pure stupidity incarnate, it was in that jury of Carriford. There existed in the mass the stupidity of twelve and not the penetration of one.'

'Is she quite well?' said Springrove.

'Who?--O, my sister, Cytherea. Thank you, nearly well, now. I'll call her.'

'Wait one minute. I have a word to say to you.'

Owen sat down again.

'You know, without my saying it, that I love Cytherea as dearly as ever.... I think she loves me too,--does she really?'

There was in Owen enough of that worldly policy on the subject of matchmaking which naturally resides in the breasts of parents and guardians, to give him a certain caution in replying, and, younger as he was by five years than Edward, it had an odd effect.

'Well, she may possibly love you still,' he said, as if rather in doubt as to the truth of his words.

Springrove's countenance instantly saddened; he had expected a simple 'Yes,' at the very least. He continued in a tone of greater depression--

'Supposing she does love me, would it be fair to you and to her if I made her an offer of marriage, with these dreary conditions attached--that we lived for a few years on the narrowest system, till a great debt, which all honour and duty require me to pay off, shall be paid? My father, by reason of the misfortune that befell him, is under a great obligation to Miss Aldclyffe. He is getting old, and losing his energies. I am attempting to work free of the burden. This makes my prospects gloomy enough at present.

'But consider again,' he went on. 'Cytherea has been left in a nameless and unsatisfactory, though innocent state, by this unfortunate, and now void, marriage with Manston. A marriage with me, though under

the--materially--untoward conditions I have mentioned, would make us happy; it would give her a locus standi. If she wished to be out of the sound of her misfortunes we would go to another part of England--emigrate--do anything.'

'I'll call Cytherea,' said Owen. 'It is a matter which she alone can settle.' He did not speak warmly. His pride could not endure the pity which Edward's visit and errand tacitly implied. Yet, in the other affair, his heart went with Edward; he was on the same beat for paying off old debts himself.

'Cythie, Mr. Springrove is here,' he said, at the foot of the staircase.

His sister descended the creaking old steps with a faltering tread, and stood in the firelight from the hearth. She extended her hand to Springrove, welcoming him by a mere motion of the lip, her eyes averted--a habit which had engendered itself in her since the beginning of her illness and defamation. Owen opened the door and went out--leaving the lovers alone. It was the first time they had met since the memorable night at Southampton.

'I will get a light,' she said, with a little embarrassment.

'No--don't, please, Cytherea,' said Edward softly, 'Come and sit down with me.'

'O yes. I ought to have asked you to,' she returned timidly.

'Everybody sits in the chimney-corner in this parish. You sit on that side. I'll sit here.'

Two recesses--one on the right, one on the left hand--were cut in the inside of the fireplace, and here they sat down facing each other, on benches fitted to the recesses, the fire glowing on the hearth between their feet. Its ruddy light shone on the underslopes of their faces, and spread out over the floor of the room with the low horizontality of the setting sun, giving to every grain of sand and tumour in the paving a long shadow towards the door.

Edward looked at his pale love through the thin azure twines of smoke that went up like ringlets between them, and invested her, as seen through its medium, with the shadowy appearance of a phantom. Nothing is so potent for coaxing back the lost eyes of a woman as a discreet silence in the man who has so lost them--and thus the patient Edward coaxed hers. After lingering on the hearth for half a minute, waiting in vain for another word from him, they were lifted into his face.

He was ready primed to receive them. 'Cytherea, will you marry me?' he said.

He could not wait in his original position till the answer came.

Stepping across the front of the fire to her own side of the chimney corner, he reclined at her feet, and searched for her hand. She

continued in silence awhile.

'Edward, I can never be anybody's wife,' she then said sadly, and with firmness.

'Think of it in every light,' he pleaded; 'the light of love, first.

Then, when you have done that, see how wise a step it would be. I can only offer you poverty as yet, but I want--I do so long to secure you from the intrusion of that unpleasant past, which will often and always be thrust before you as long as you live the shrinking solitary life you do now--a life which purity chooses, it may be; but to the outside world it appears like the enforced loneliness of neglect and scorn--and tongues are busy inventing a reason for it which does not exist.'

'I know all about it,' she said hastily; 'and those are the grounds of my refusal. You and Owen know the whole truth--the two I love best on earth--and I am content. But the scandal will be continually repeated, and I can never give any one the opportunity of saying to you--that--your wife....' She utterly broke down and wept.

'Don't, my own darling!' he entreated. 'Don't, Cytherea!'

'Please to leave me--we will be friends, Edward--but don't press me--my mind is made up--I cannot--I will not marry you or any man under the present ambiguous circumstances--never will I--I have said it: never!'

They were both silent. He listlessly regarded the illuminated blackness overhead, where long flakes of soot floated from the sides and bars of the chimney-throat like tattered banners in ancient aisles; whilst through the square opening in the midst one or two bright stars looked down upon them from the grey March sky. The sight seemed to cheer him.

'At any rate you will love me?' he murmured to her.

'Yes--always--for ever and for ever!'

He kissed her once, twice, three times, and arose to his feet, slowly withdrawing himself from her side towards the door. Cytherea remained with her gaze fixed on the fire. Edward went out grieving, but hope was not extinguished even now.

He smelt the fragrance of a cigar, and immediately afterwards saw a small red star of fire against the darkness of the hedge. Graye was pacing up and down the lane, smoking as he walked. Springrove told him the result of the interview.

'You are a good fellow, Edward,' he said; 'but I think my sister is right.'

'I wish you would believe Manston a villain, as I do,' said Springrove.

'It would be absurd of me to say that I like him now--family feeling

prevents it, but I cannot in honesty say deliberately that he is a bad man.'

Edward could keep the secret of Manston's coercion of Miss Aldclyffe in the matter of the houses a secret no longer. He told Owen the whole story.

'That's one thing,' he continued, 'but not all. What do you think of this--I have discovered that he went to Budmouth post-office for a letter the day before the first advertisement for his wife appeared in the papers. One was there for him, and it was directed in his wife's handwriting, as I can prove. This was not till after the marriage with Cytherea, it is true, but if (as it seems to show) the advertising was a farce, there is a strong presumption that the rest of the piece was.'

Owen was too astounded to speak. He dropped his cigar, and fixed his eyes upon his companion.

'Collusion!'

'Yes.'

'With his first wife?'

'Yes--with his wife. I am firmly persuaded of it.'

'What did you discover?'

'That he fetched from the post-office at Budmouth a letter from her the day before the first advertisement appeared.'

Graye was lost in a long consideration. 'Ah!' he said, 'it would be difficult to prove anything of that sort now. The writing could not be sworn to, and if he is guilty the letter is destroyed.'

'I have other suspicions--'

'Yes--as you said' interrupted Owen, who had not till now been able to form the complicated set of ideas necessary for picturing the position.

'Yes, there is this to be remembered--Cytherea had been taken from him before that letter came--and his knowledge of his wife's existence could not have originated till after the wedding. I could have sworn he believed her dead then. His manner was unmistakable.'

'Well, I have other suspicions,' repeated Edward; 'and if I only had the right--if I were her husband or brother, he should be convicted of bigamy yet.'

'The reproof was not needed,' said Owen, with a little bitterness. 'What can I do--a man with neither money nor friends--whilst Manston has Miss Aldclyffe and all her fortune to back him up? God only knows what lies between the mistress and her steward, but since this has transpired--if

it is true--I can believe the connection to be even an unworthy one--a thing I certainly never so much as owned to myself before.'

3. THE FIFTH OF MARCH

Edward's disclosure had the effect of directing Owen Graye's thoughts into an entirely new and uncommon channel.

On the Monday after Springrove's visit, Owen had walked to the top of a hill in the neighbourhood of Tolchurch--a wild hill that had no name, beside a barren down where it never looked like summer. In the intensity of his meditations on the ever-present subject, he sat down on a weather-beaten boundary-stone gazing towards the distant valleys--seeing only Manston's imagined form.

Had his defenceless sister been trifled with? that was the question which affected him. Her refusal of Edward as a husband was, he knew, dictated solely by a humiliated sense of inadequacy to him in repute, and had not been formed till since the slanderous tale accounting for her seclusion had been circulated. Was it not true, as Edward had hinted, that he, her brother, was neglecting his duty towards her in allowing Manston to thrive unquestioned, whilst she was hiding her head for no fault at all?

Was it possible that Manston was sensuous villain enough to have contemplated, at any moment before the marriage with Cytherea, the

return of his first wife, when he should have grown weary of his new toy? Had he believed that, by a skilful manipulation of such circumstances as chance would throw in his way, he could escape all suspicion of having known that she lived? Only one fact within his own direct knowledge afforded the least ground for such a supposition. It was that, possessed by a woman only in the humble and unprotected station of a lady's hired companion, his sister's beauty might scarcely have been sufficient to induce a selfish man like Manston to make her his wife, unless he had foreseen the possibility of getting rid of her again.

'But for that stratagem of Manston's in relation to the Springroves,' Owen thought, 'Cythie might now have been the happy wife of Edward. True, that he influenced Miss Aldclyffe only rests on Edward's suspicions, but the grounds are good--the probability is strong.'

He went indoors and questioned Cytherea.

'On the night of the fire, who first said that Mrs. Manston was burnt?' he asked.

'I don't know who started the report.'

'Was it Manston?'

'It was certainly not he. All doubt on the subject was removed before he

came to the spot--that I am certain of. Everybody knew that she did not escape after the house was on fire, and thus all overlooked the fact that she might have left before--of course that would have seemed such an improbable thing for anybody to do.'

'Yes, until the porter's story of her irritation and doubt as to her course made it natural.'

'What settled the matter at the inquest,' said Cytherea, 'was Mr. Manston's evidence that the watch was his wife's.'

'He was sure of that, wasn't he?'

'I believe he said he was certain of it.'

'It might have been hers--left behind in her perturbation, as they say it was--impossible as that seems at first sight. Yes--on the whole, he might have believed in her death.'

'I know by several proofs that then, and at least for some time after, he had no other thought than that she was dead. I now think that before the porter's confession he knew something about her--though not that she lived.'

'Why do you?'

'From what he said to me on the evening of the wedding-day, when I had fastened myself in the room at the hotel, after Edward's visit. He must have suspected that I knew something, for he was irritated, and in a passion of uneasy doubt. He said, "You don't suppose my first wife is come to light again, madam, surely?" Directly he had let the remark slip out, he seemed anxious to withdraw it.'

'That's odd,' said Owen.

'I thought it very odd.'

'Still we must remember he might only have hit upon the thought by accident, in doubt as to your motive. Yes, the great point to discover remains the same as ever--did he doubt his first impression of her death before he married you. I can't help thinking he did, although he was so astounded at our news that night. Edward swears he did.'

'It was perhaps only a short time before,' said Cytherea; 'when he could hardly recede from having me.'

'Seasoning justice with mercy as usual, Cytherea. 'Tis unfair to yourself to talk like that. If I could only bring him to ruin as a bigamist--supposing him to be one--I should die happy. That's what we must find out by fair means or foul--was he a wilful bigamist?'

'It is no use trying, Owen. You would have to employ a solicitor, and

how can you do that?'

'I can't at all--I know that very well. But neither do I altogether wish to at present--a lawyer must have a case--facts to go upon, that means. Now they are scarce at present--as scarce as money is with us, and till we have found more money there is no hurry for a lawyer. Perhaps by the time we have the facts we shall have the money. The only thing we lose in working alone in this way, is time--not the issue: for the fruit that one mind matures in a twelvemonth forms a more perfectly organized whole than that of twelve minds in one month, especially if the interests of the single one are vitally concerned, and those of the twelve are only hired. But there is not only my mind available--you are a shrewd woman, Cythie, and Edward is an earnest ally. Then, if we really get a sure footing for a criminal prosecution, the Crown will take up the case.'

'I don't much care to press on in the matter,' she murmured. 'What good can it do us, Owen, after all?'

'Selfishly speaking, it will do this good--that all the facts of your journey to Southampton will become known, and the scandal will die. Besides, Manston will have to suffer--it's an act of justice to you and to other women, and to Edward Springrove.'

He now thought it necessary to tell her of the real nature of the Springroves' obligation to Miss Aldclyffe--and their nearly certain knowledge that Manston was the prime mover in effecting their

embarrassment. Her face flushed as she listened.

'And now,' he said, 'our first undertaking is to find out where Mrs. Manston lived during the separation; next, when the first communications passed between them after the fire.'

'If we only had Miss Aldclyffe's countenance and assistance as I used to have them,' Cytherea returned, 'how strong we should be! O, what power is it that he exercises over her, swaying her just as he wishes! She loves me now. Mrs. Morris in her letter said that Miss Aldclyffe prayed for me--yes, she heard her praying for me, and crying. Miss Aldclyffe did not mind an old friend like Mrs. Morris knowing it, either. Yet in opposition to this, notice her dead silence and inaction throughout this proceeding.'

'It is a mystery; but never mind that now,' said Owen impressively. 'About where Mrs. Manston has been living. We must get this part of it first--learn the place of her stay in the early stage of their separation, during the period of Manston's arrival here, and so on, for that was where she was first communicated with on the subject of coming to Knapwater, before the fire; and that address, too, was her point of departure when she came to her husband by stealth in the night--you know--the time I visited you in the evening and went home early in the morning, and it was found that he had been visited too. Ah! couldn't we inquire of Mrs. Leat, who keeps the post-office at Carriford, if she remembers where the letters to Mrs. Manston were directed?'

'He never posted his letters to her in the parish--it was remarked at the time. I was thinking if something relating to her address might not be found in the report of the inquest in the Casterbridge Chronicle of the date. Some facts about the inquest were given in the papers to a certainty.'

Her brother caught eagerly at the suggestion. 'Who has a file of the Chronicles?' he said.

'Mr. Raunham used to file them,' said Cytherea. 'He was rather friendly-disposed towards me, too.'

Owen could not, on any consideration, escape from his attendance at the church-building till Saturday evening; and thus it became necessary, unless they actually wasted time, that Cytherea herself should assist.

'I act under your orders, Owen,' she said.

XVI. THE EVENTS OF ONE WEEK

1. MARCH THE SIXTH

The next morning the opening move of the game was made. Cytherea, under