Chapter III

'Melodious birds sing madrigals'

That first repast in Endelstow Vicarage was a very agreeable one to young Stephen Smith. The table was spread, as Elfride had suggested to her father, with the materials for the heterogeneous meal called high tea--a class of refection welcome to all when away from men and towns, and particularly attractive to youthful palates. The table was prettily decked with winter flowers and leaves, amid which the eye was greeted by chops, chicken, pie, &c., and two huge pasties overhanging the sides of the dish with a cheerful aspect of abundance.

At the end, towards the fireplace, appeared the tea-service, of old-fashioned Worcester porcelain, and behind this arose the slight form of Elfride, attempting to add matronly dignity to the movement of pouring out tea, and to have a weighty and concerned look in matters of marmalade, honey, and clotted cream. Having made her own meal before he arrived, she found to her embarrassment that there was nothing left for her to do but talk when not assisting him. She asked him if he would excuse her finishing a letter she had been writing at a side-table, and, after sitting down to it, tingled with a sense of being grossly rude. However, seeing that he noticed nothing personally wrong in her, and that he too was embarrassed when she attentively watched his cup to refill it, Elfride became better at ease; and when furthermore he

accidentally kicked the leg of the table, and then nearly upset his tea-cup, just as schoolboys did, she felt herself mistress of the situation, and could talk very well. In a few minutes ingenuousness and a common term of years obliterated all recollection that they were strangers just met. Stephen began to wax eloquent on extremely slight experiences connected with his professional pursuits; and she, having no experiences to fall back upon, recounted with much animation stories that had been related to her by her father, which would have astonished him had he heard with what fidelity of action and tone they were rendered. Upon the whole, a very interesting picture of Sweet-and-Twenty was on view that evening in Mr. Swancourt's house.

Ultimately Stephen had to go upstairs and talk loud to the vicar, receiving from him between his puffs a great many apologies for calling him so unceremoniously to a stranger's bedroom. 'But,' continued Mr. Swancourt, 'I felt that I wanted to say a few words to you before the morning, on the business of your visit. One's patience gets exhausted by staying a prisoner in bed all day through a sudden freak of one's enemy--new to me, though--for I have known very little of gout as yet. However, he's gone to my other toe in a very mild manner, and I expect he'll slink off altogether by the morning. I hope you have been well attended to downstairs?'

'Perfectly. And though it is unfortunate, and I am sorry to see you laid up, I beg you will not take the slightest notice of my being in the house the while.'

'I will not. But I shall be down to-morrow. My daughter is an excellent doctor. A dose or two of her mild mixtures will fetch me round quicker than all the drug stuff in the world. Well, now about the church business. Take a seat, do. We can't afford to stand upon ceremony in these parts as you see, and for this reason, that a civilized human being seldom stays long with us; and so we cannot waste time in approaching him, or he will be gone before we have had the pleasure of close acquaintance. This tower of ours is, as you will notice, entirely gone beyond the possibility of restoration; but the church itself is well enough. You should see some of the churches in this county. Floors rotten: ivy lining the walls.'

'Dear me!'

'Oh, that's nothing. The congregation of a neighbour of mine, whenever a storm of rain comes on during service, open their umbrellas and hold them up till the dripping ceases from the roof. Now, if you will kindly bring me those papers and letters you see lying on the table, I will show you how far we have got.'

Stephen crossed the room to fetch them, and the vicar seemed to notice more particularly the slim figure of his visitor.

'I suppose you are quite competent?' he said.

'Quite,' said the young man, colouring slightly.

'You are very young, I fancy--I should say you are not more than nineteen?'

I am nearly twenty-one.'

'Exactly half my age; I am forty-two.'

'By the way,' said Mr. Swancourt, after some conversation, 'you said your whole name was Stephen Fitzmaurice, and that your grandfather came originally from Caxbury. Since I have been speaking, it has occurred to me that I know something of you. You belong to a well-known ancient county family--not ordinary Smiths in the least.'

'I don't think we have any of their blood in our veins.'

'Nonsense! you must. Hand me the "Landed Gentry." Now, let me see. There, Stephen Fitzmaurice Smith--he lies in St. Mary's Church, doesn't he? Well, out of that family Sprang the Leaseworthy Smiths, and collaterally came General Sir Stephen Fitzmaurice Smith of Caxbury----'

'Yes; I have seen his monument there,' shouted Stephen. 'But there is no connection between his family and mine: there cannot be.'

'There is none, possibly, to your knowledge. But look at this, my dear

sir,' said the vicar, striking his fist upon the bedpost for emphasis. 'Here are you, Stephen Fitzmaurice Smith, living in London, but springing from Caxbury. Here in this book is a genealogical tree of the Stephen Fitzmaurice Smiths of Caxbury Manor. You may be only a family of professional men now--I am not inquisitive: I don't ask questions of that kind; it is not in me to do so--but it is as plain as the nose in your face that there's your origin! And, Mr. Smith, I congratulate you upon your blood; blue blood, sir; and, upon my life, a very desirable colour, as the world goes.'

'I wish you could congratulate me upon some more tangible quality,' said the younger man, sadly no less than modestly.

'Nonsense! that will come with time. You are young: all your life is before you. Now look--see how far back in the mists of antiquity my own family of Swancourt have a root. Here, you see,' he continued, turning to the page, 'is Geoffrey, the one among my ancestors who lost a barony because he would cut his joke. Ah, it's the sort of us! But the story is too long to tell now. Ay, I'm a poor man--a poor gentleman, in fact: those I would be friends with, won't be friends with me; those who are willing to be friends with me, I am above being friends with. Beyond dining with a neighbouring incumbent or two, and an occasional chat--sometimes dinner--with Lord Luxellian, a connection of mine, I am in absolute solitude--absolute.'

'You have your studies, your books, and your--daughter.'

'Oh yes, yes; and I don't complain of poverty. Canto coram latrone. Well, Mr. Smith, don't let me detain you any longer in a sick room. Ha! that reminds me of a story I once heard in my younger days.' Here the vicar began a series of small private laughs, and Stephen looked inquiry. 'Oh, no, no! it is too bad--too bad to tell!' continued Mr. Swancourt in undertones of grim mirth. 'Well, go downstairs; my daughter must do the best she can with you this evening. Ask her to sing to you--she plays and sings very nicely. Good-night; I feel as if I had known you for five or six years. I'll ring for somebody to show you down.'

'Never mind,' said Stephen, 'I can find the way.' And he went downstairs, thinking of the delightful freedom of manner in the remoter counties in comparison with the reserve of London.

'I forgot to tell you that my father was rather deaf,' said Elfride anxiously, when Stephen entered the little drawing-room.

'Never mind; I know all about it, and we are great friends,' the man of business replied enthusiastically. 'And, Miss Swancourt, will you kindly sing to me?'

To Miss Swancourt this request seemed, what in fact it was, exceptionally point-blank; though she guessed that her father had some

hand in framing it, knowing, rather to her cost, of his unceremonious way of utilizing her for the benefit of dull sojourners. At the same time, as Mr. Smith's manner was too frank to provoke criticism, and his age too little to inspire fear, she was ready--not to say pleased--to accede. Selecting from the canterbury some old family ditties, that in years gone by had been played and sung by her mother, Elfride sat down to the pianoforte, and began, ''Twas on the evening of a winter's day,' in a pretty contralto voice.

'Do you like that old thing, Mr. Smith?' she said at the end.

'Yes, I do much,' said Stephen--words he would have uttered, and sincerely, to anything on earth, from glee to requiem, that she might have chosen.

'You shall have a little one by De Leyre, that was given me by a young French lady who was staying at Endelstow House:

'"Je l'ai plante, je l'ai vu naitre,
Ce beau rosier ou les oiseaux," &c.;

and then I shall want to give you my own favourite for the very last, Shelley's "When the lamp is shattered," as set to music by my poor mother. I so much like singing to anybody who REALLY cares to hear me.'

Every woman who makes a permanent impression on a man is usually recalled to his mind's eye as she appeared in one particular scene, which seems ordained to be her special form of manifestation throughout the pages of his memory. As the patron Saint has her attitude and accessories in mediaeval illumination, so the sweetheart may be said to have hers upon the table of her true Love's fancy, without which she is rarely introduced there except by effort; and this though she may, on further acquaintance, have been observed in many other phases which one would imagine to be far more appropriate to love's young dream.

Miss Elfride's image chose the form in which she was beheld during these minutes of singing, for her permanent attitude of visitation to Stephen's eyes during his sleeping and waking hours in after days. The profile is seen of a young woman in a pale gray silk dress with trimmings of swan's-down, and opening up from a point in front, like a waistcoat without a shirt; the cool colour contrasting admirably with the warm bloom of her neck and face. The furthermost candle on the piano comes immediately in a line with her head, and half invisible itself, forms the accidentally frizzled hair into a nebulous haze of light, surrounding her crown like an aureola. Her hands are in their place on the keys, her lips parted, and trilling forth, in a tender diminuendo, the closing words of the sad apostrophe:

'O Love, who bewailest

The frailty of all things here,
Why choose you the frailest
For your cradle, your home, and your bier!'

Her head is forward a little, and her eyes directed keenly upward to the top of the page of music confronting her. Then comes a rapid look into Stephen's face, and a still more rapid look back again to her business, her face having dropped its sadness, and acquired a certain expression of mischievous archness the while; which lingered there for some time, but was never developed into a positive smile of flirtation.

Stephen suddenly shifted his position from her right hand to her left, where there was just room enough for a small ottoman to stand between the piano and the corner of the room. Into this nook he squeezed himself, and gazed wistfully up into Elfride's face. So long and so earnestly gazed he, that her cheek deepened to a more and more crimson tint as each line was added to her song. Concluding, and pausing motionless after the last word for a minute or two, she ventured to look at him again. His features wore an expression of unutterable heaviness.

'You don't hear many songs, do you, Mr. Smith, to take so much notice of these of mine?'

'Perhaps it was the means and vehicle of the song that I was noticing: I mean yourself,' he answered gently.

'Now, Mr. Smith!'

'It is perfectly true; I don't hear much singing. You mistake what I am, I fancy. Because I come as a stranger to a secluded spot, you think I must needs come from a life of bustle, and know the latest movements of the day. But I don't. My life is as quiet as yours, and more solitary; solitary as death.'

'The death which comes from a plethora of life? But seriously, I can quite see that you are not the least what I thought you would be before I saw you. You are not critical, or experienced, or--much to mind. That's why I don't mind singing airs to you that I only half know.' Finding that by this confession she had vexed him in a way she did not intend, she added naively, 'I mean, Mr. Smith, that you are better, not worse, for being only young and not very experienced. You don't think my life here so very tame and dull, I know.'

'I do not, indeed,' he said with fervour. 'It must be delightfully poetical, and sparkling, and fresh, and----'

'There you go, Mr. Smith! Well, men of another kind, when I get them to be honest enough to own the truth, think just the reverse: that my life must be a dreadful bore in its normal state, though pleasant for the exceptional few days they pass here.'

'I could live here always!' he said, and with such a tone and look of unconscious revelation that Elfride was startled to find that her harmonies had fired a small Troy, in the shape of Stephen's heart. She said quickly:

'But you can't live here always.'

'Oh no.' And he drew himself in with the sensitiveness of a snail.

Elfride's emotions were sudden as his in kindling, but the least of woman's lesser infirmities--love of admiration--caused an inflammable disposition on his part, so exactly similar to her own, to appear as meritorious in him as modesty made her own seem culpable in her.