Chapter IV

'Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap.'

For reasons of his own, Stephen Smith was stirring a short time after dawn the next morning. From the window of his room he could see, first, two bold escarpments sloping down together like the letter V. Towards the bottom, like liquid in a funnel, appeared the sea, gray and small. On the brow of one hill, of rather greater altitude than its neighbour, stood the church which was to be the scene of his operations. The lonely edifice was black and bare, cutting up into the sky from the very tip of the hill. It had a square mouldering tower, owning neither battlement nor pinnacle, and seemed a monolithic termination, of one substance with the ridge, rather than a structure raised thereon. Round the church ran a low wall; over-topping the wall in general level was the graveyard; not as a graveyard usually is, a fragment of landscape with its due variety of chiaro-oscuro, but a mere profile against the sky, serrated with the outlines of graves and a very few memorial stones. Not a tree could exist up there: nothing but the monotonous gray-green grass.

Five minutes after this casual survey was made his bedroom was empty, and its occupant had vanished quietly from the house.

At the end of two hours he was again in the room, looking warm and glowing. He now pursued the artistic details of dressing, which on

his first rising had been entirely omitted. And a very blooming boy he looked, after that mysterious morning scamper. His mouth was a triumph of its class. It was the cleanly-cut, piquantly pursed-up mouth of William Pitt, as represented in the well or little known bust by Nollekens--a mouth which is in itself a young man's fortune, if properly exercised. His round chin, where its upper part turned inward, still continued its perfect and full curve, seeming to press in to a point the bottom of his nether lip at their place of junction.

Once he murmured the name of Elfride. Ah, there she was! On the lawn in a plain dress, without hat or bonnet, running with a boy's velocity, superadded to a girl's lightness, after a tame rabbit she was endeavouring to capture, her strategic intonations of coaxing words alternating with desperate rushes so much out of keeping with them, that the hollowness of such expressions was but too evident to her pet, who darted and dodged in carefully timed counterpart.

The scene down there was altogether different from that of the hills. A thicket of shrubs and trees enclosed the favoured spot from the wilderness without; even at this time of the year the grass was luxuriant there. No wind blew inside the protecting belt of evergreens, wasting its force upon the higher and stronger trees forming the outer margin of the grove.

Then he heard a heavy person shuffling about in slippers, and calling 'Mr. Smith!' Smith proceeded to the study, and found Mr. Swancourt. The

young man expressed his gladness to see his host downstairs.

'Oh yes; I knew I should soon be right again. I have not made the acquaintance of gout for more than two years, and it generally goes off the second night. Well, where have you been this morning? I saw you come in just now, I think!'

'Yes; I have been for a walk.'

'Start early?'

'Yes.'

'Very early, I think?'

'Yes, it was rather early.'

'Which way did you go? To the sea, I suppose. Everybody goes seaward.'

'No; I followed up the river as far as the park wall.'

'You are different from your kind. Well, I suppose such a wild place is a novelty, and so tempted you out of bed?'

'Not altogether a novelty. I like it.'

The youth seemed averse to explanation.

'You must, you must; to go cock-watching the morning after a journey of fourteen or sixteen hours. But there's no accounting for tastes, and I am glad to see that yours are no meaner. After breakfast, but not before, I shall be good for a ten miles' walk, Master Smith.'

Certainly there seemed nothing exaggerated in that assertion. Mr. Swancourt by daylight showed himself to be a man who, in common with the other two people under his roof, had really strong claims to be considered handsome,--handsome, that is, in the sense in which the moon is bright: the ravines and valleys which, on a close inspection, are seen to diversify its surface being left out of the argument. His face was of a tint that never deepened upon his cheeks nor lightened upon his forehead, but remained uniform throughout; the usual neutral salmon-colour of a man who feeds well--not to say too well--and does not think hard; every pore being in visible working order. His tout ensemble was that of a highly improved class of farmer, dressed up in the wrong clothes; that of a firm-standing perpendicular man, whose fall would have been backwards in direction if he had ever lost his balance.

The vicar's background was at present what a vicar's background should be, his study. Here the consistency ends. All along the chimneypiece were ranged bottles of horse, pig, and cow medicines, and against the wall was a high table, made up of the fragments of an old oak lychgate. Upon this stood stuffed specimens of owls, divers, and gulls, and over

them bunches of wheat and barley ears, labelled with the date of the year that produced them. Some cases and shelves, more or less laden with books, the prominent titles of which were Dr. Brown's 'Notes on the Romans,' Dr. Smith's 'Notes on the Corinthians,' and Dr. Robinson's 'Notes on the Galatians, Ephesians, and Philippians,' just saved the character of the place, in spite of a girl's doll's-house standing above them, a marine aquarium in the window, and Elfride's hat hanging on its corner.

'Business, business!' said Mr. Swancourt after breakfast. He began to find it necessary to act the part of a fly-wheel towards the somewhat irregular forces of his visitor.

They prepared to go to the church; the vicar, on second thoughts, mounting his coal-black mare to avoid exerting his foot too much at starting. Stephen said he should want a man to assist him. 'Worm!' the vicar shouted.

A minute or two after a voice was heard round the corner of the building, mumbling, 'Ah, I used to be strong enough, but 'tis altered now! Well, there, I'm as independent as one here and there, even if they do write 'squire after their names.'

'What's the matter?' said the vicar, as William Worm appeared; when the remarks were repeated to him.

'Worm says some very true things sometimes,' Mr. Swancourt said, turning to Stephen. 'Now, as regards that word "esquire." Why, Mr. Smith, that word "esquire" is gone to the dogs,--used on the letters of every jackanapes who has a black coat. Anything else, Worm?'

'Ay, the folk have begun frying again!'

'Dear me! I'm sorry to hear that.'

'Yes,' Worm said groaningly to Stephen, 'I've got such a noise in my head that there's no living night nor day. 'Tis just for all the world like people frying fish: fry, fry, fry, all day long in my poor head, till I don't know whe'r I'm here or yonder. There, God A'mighty will find it out sooner or later, I hope, and relieve me.'

'Now, my deafness,' said Mr. Swancourt impressively, 'is a dead silence; but William Worm's is that of people frying fish in his head. Very remarkable, isn't it?'

'I can hear the frying-pan a-fizzing as naterel as life,' said Worm corroboratively.

'Yes, it is remarkable,' said Mr. Smith.

'Very peculiar, very peculiar,' echoed the vicar; and they all then followed the path up the hill, bounded on each side by a little stone

wall, from which gleamed fragments of quartz and blood-red marbles, apparently of inestimable value, in their setting of brown alluvium. Stephen walked with the dignity of a man close to the horse's head, Worm stumbled along a stone's throw in the rear, and Elfride was nowhere in particular, yet everywhere; sometimes in front, sometimes behind, sometimes at the sides, hovering about the procession like a butterfly; not definitely engaged in travelling, yet somehow chiming in at points with the general progress.

The vicar explained things as he went on: 'The fact is, Mr. Smith, I didn't want this bother of church restoration at all, but it was necessary to do something in self-defence, on account of those d----dissenters: I use the word in its scriptural meaning, of course, not as an expletive.'

'How very odd!' said Stephen, with the concern demanded of serious friendliness.

'Odd? That's nothing to how it is in the parish of Twinkley. Both the churchwardens are----; there, I won't say what they are; and the clerk and the sexton as well.'

'How very strange!' said Stephen.

'Strange? My dear sir, that's nothing to how it is in the parish of Sinnerton. However, as to our own parish, I hope we shall make some

progress soon.'

'You must trust to circumstances.'

'There are no circumstances to trust to. We may as well trust in Providence if we trust at all. But here we are. A wild place, isn't it? But I like it on such days as these.'

The churchyard was entered on this side by a stone stile, over which having clambered, you remained still on the wild hill, the within not being so divided from the without as to obliterate the sense of open freedom. A delightful place to be buried in, postulating that delight can accompany a man to his tomb under any circumstances. There was nothing horrible in this churchyard, in the shape of tight mounds bonded with sticks, which shout imprisonment in the ears rather than whisper rest; or trim garden-flowers, which only raise images of people in new black crape and white handkerchiefs coming to tend them; or wheel-marks, which remind us of hearses and mourning coaches; or cypress-bushes, which make a parade of sorrow; or coffin-boards and bones lying behind trees, showing that we are only leaseholders of our graves. No; nothing but long, wild, untutored grass, diversifying the forms of the mounds it covered,--themselves irregularly shaped, with no eye to effect; the impressive presence of the old mountain that all this was a part of being nowhere excluded by disguising art. Outside were similar slopes and similar grass; and then the serene impassive sea, visible to a width of half the horizon, and meeting the eye with the effect of a

vast concave, like the interior of a blue vessel. Detached rocks stood upright afar, a collar of foam girding their bases, and repeating in its whiteness the plumage of a countless multitude of gulls that restlessly hovered about.

'Now, Worm!' said Mr. Swancourt sharply; and Worm started into an attitude of attention at once to receive orders. Stephen and himself were then left in possession, and the work went on till early in the afternoon, when dinner was announced by Unity of the vicarage kitchen running up the hill without a bonnet.

Elfride did not make her appearance inside the building till late in the afternoon, and came then by special invitation from Stephen during dinner. She looked so intensely LIVING and full of movement as she came into the old silent place, that young Smith's world began to be lit by 'the purple light' in all its definiteness. Worm was got rid of by sending him to measure the height of the tower.

What could she do but come close--so close that a minute arc of her skirt touched his foot--and asked him how he was getting on with his sketches, and set herself to learn the principles of practical mensuration as applied to irregular buildings? Then she must ascend the pulpit to re-imagine for the hundredth time how it would seem to be a preacher.

Presently she leant over the front of the pulpit.

'Don't you tell papa, will you, Mr. Smith, if I tell you something?' she said with a sudden impulse to make a confidence.

'Oh no, that I won't,' said he, staring up.

'Well, I write papa's sermons for him very often, and he preaches them better than he does his own; and then afterwards he talks to people and to me about what he said in his sermon to-day, and forgets that I wrote it for him. Isn't it absurd?'

'How clever you must be!' said Stephen. 'I couldn't write a sermon for the world.'

'Oh, it's easy enough,' she said, descending from the pulpit and coming close to him to explain more vividly. 'You do it like this. Did you ever play a game of forfeits called "When is it? where is it? what is it?"'

'No, never.'

'Ah, that's a pity, because writing a sermon is very much like playing that game. You take the text. You think, why is it? what is it? and so on. You put that down under "Generally." Then you proceed to the First, Secondly, and Thirdly. Papa won't have Fourthlys--says they are all my eye. Then you have a final Collectively, several pages of this being

put in great black brackets, writing opposite, "LEAVE THIS OUT IF THE FARMERS ARE FALLING ASLEEP." Then comes your In Conclusion, then A Few Words And I Have Done. Well, all this time you have put on the back of each page, "KEEP YOUR VOICE DOWN"--I mean,' she added, correcting herself, 'that's how I do in papa's sermon-book, because otherwise he gets louder and louder, till at last he shouts like a farmer up a-field. Oh, papa is so funny in some things!'

Then, after this childish burst of confidence, she was frightened, as if warned by womanly instinct, which for the moment her ardour had outrun, that she had been too forward to a comparative stranger.

Elfride saw her father then, and went away into the wind, being caught by a gust as she ascended the churchyard slope, in which gust she had the motions, without the motives, of a hoiden; the grace, without the self-consciousness, of a pirouetter. She conversed for a minute or two with her father, and proceeded homeward, Mr. Swancourt coming on to the church to Stephen. The wind had freshened his warm complexion as it freshens the glow of a brand. He was in a mood of jollity, and watched Elfride down the hill with a smile.

'You little flyaway! you look wild enough now,' he said, and turned to Stephen. 'But she's not a wild child at all, Mr. Smith. As steady as you; and that you are steady I see from your diligence here.'

'I think Miss Swancourt very clever,' Stephen observed.

'Yes, she is; certainly, she is,' said papa, turning his voice as much as possible to the neutral tone of disinterested criticism. 'Now, Smith, I'll tell you something; but she mustn't know it for the world--not for the world, mind, for she insists upon keeping it a dead secret. Why, SHE WRITES MY SERMONS FOR ME OFTEN, and a very good job she makes of them!'

'She can do anything.'

'She can do that. The little rascal has the very trick of the trade. But, mind you, Smith, not a word about it to her, not a single word!'

'Not a word,' said Smith.

'Look there,' said Mr. Swancourt. 'What do you think of my roofing?' He pointed with his walking-stick at the chancel roof,

'Did you do that, sir?'

'Yes, I worked in shirt-sleeves all the time that was going on. I pulled down the old rafters, fixed the new ones, put on the battens, slated the roof, all with my own hands, Worm being my assistant. We worked like slaves, didn't we, Worm?'

'Ay, sure, we did; harder than some here and there--hee, hee!' said William Worm, cropping up from somewhere. 'Like slaves, 'a b'lieve--hee, hee! And weren't ye foaming mad, sir, when the nails wouldn't go straight? Mighty I! There, 'tisn't so bad to cuss and keep it in as to cuss and let it out, is it, sir?'

'Well--why?'

'Because you, sir, when ye were a-putting on the roof, only used to cuss in your mind, which is, I suppose, no harm at all.'

'I don't think you know what goes on in my mind, Worm.'

'Oh, doan't I, sir--hee, hee! Maybe I'm but a poor wambling thing, sir, and can't read much; but I can spell as well as some here and there. Doan't ye mind, sir, that blustrous night when ye asked me to hold the candle to ye in yer workshop, when you were making a new chair for the chancel?'

'Yes; what of that?'

'I stood with the candle, and you said you liked company, if 'twas only a dog or cat--maning me; and the chair wouldn't do nohow.'

'Ah, I remember.'

'No; the chair wouldn't do nohow. 'A was very well to look at; but, Lord!----'

'Worm, how often have I corrected you for irreverent speaking?'

'--'A was very well to look at, but you couldn't sit in the chair nohow. 'Twas all a-twist wi' the chair, like the letter Z, directly you sat down upon the chair. "Get up, Worm," says you, when you seed the chair go all a-sway wi' me. Up you took the chair, and flung en like fire and brimstone to t'other end of your shop--all in a passion. "Damn the chair!" says I. "Just what I was thinking," says you, sir. "I could see it in your face, sir," says I, "and I hope you and God will forgi'e me for saying what you wouldn't." To save your life you couldn't help laughing, sir, at a poor wambler reading your thoughts so plain. Ay, I'm as wise as one here and there.'

'I thought you had better have a practical man to go over the church and tower with you,' Mr. Swancourt said to Stephen the following morning, 'so I got Lord Luxellian's permission to send for a man when you came. I told him to be there at ten o'clock. He's a very intelligent man, and he will tell you all you want to know about the state of the walls. His name is John Smith.'

Elfride did not like to be seen again at the church with Stephen. 'I will watch here for your appearance at the top of the tower,' she said laughingly. 'I shall see your figure against the sky.'

'And when I am up there I'll wave my handkerchief to you, Miss Swancourt,' said Stephen. 'In twelve minutes from this present moment,' he added, looking at his watch, 'I'll be at the summit and look out for you.'

She went round to the corner of the shrubbery, whence she could watch him down the slope leading to the foot of the hill on which the church stood. There she saw waiting for him a white spot--a mason in his working clothes. Stephen met this man and stopped.

To her surprise, instead of their moving on to the churchyard, they both leisurely sat down upon a stone close by their meeting-place, and remained as if in deep conversation. Elfride looked at the time; nine of the twelve minutes had passed, and Stephen showed no signs of moving. More minutes passed--she grew cold with waiting, and shivered. It was not till the end of a quarter of an hour that they began to slowly wend up the hill at a snail's pace.

'Rude and unmannerly!' she said to herself, colouring with pique. 'Anybody would think he was in love with that horrid mason instead of with----'

The sentence remained unspoken, though not unthought.

She returned to the porch.

'Is the man you sent for a lazy, sit-still, do-nothing kind of man?' she inquired of her father.

'No,' he said surprised; 'quite the reverse. He is Lord Luxellian's master-mason, John Smith.'

'Oh,' said Elfride indifferently, and returned towards her bleak station, and waited and shivered again. It was a trifle, after all--a childish thing--looking out from a tower and waving a handkerchief. But her new friend had promised, and why should he tease her so? The effect of a blow is as proportionate to the texture of the object struck as to its own momentum; and she had such a superlative capacity for being wounded that little hits struck her hard.

It was not till the end of half an hour that two figures were seen above the parapet of the dreary old pile, motionless as bitterns on a ruined mosque. Even then Stephen was not true enough to perform what he was so courteous to promise, and he vanished without making a sign.

He returned at midday. Elfride looked vexed when unconscious that his eyes were upon her; when conscious, severe. However, her attitude of coldness had long outlived the coldness itself, and she could no longer utter feigned words of indifference.

'Ah, you weren't kind to keep me waiting in the cold, and break your

promise,' she said at last reproachfully, in tones too low for her father's powers of hearing.

'Forgive, forgive me!' said Stephen with dismay. 'I had forgotten--quite forgotten! Something prevented my remembering.'

'Any further explanation?' said Miss Capricious, pouting.

He was silent for a few minutes, and looked askance.

'None,' he said, with the accent of one who concealed a sin.