

## Chapter V

'Bosom'd high in tufted trees.'

It was breakfast time.

As seen from the vicarage dining-room, which took a warm tone of light from the fire, the weather and scene outside seemed to have stereotyped themselves in unrelieved shades of gray. The long-armed trees and shrubs of juniper, cedar, and pine varieties, were grayish black; those of the broad-leaved sort, together with the herbage, were grayish-green; the eternal hills and tower behind them were grayish-brown; the sky, dropping behind all, gray of the purest melancholy.

Yet in spite of this sombre artistic effect, the morning was not one which tended to lower the spirits. It was even cheering. For it did not rain, nor was rain likely to fall for many days to come.

Elfride had turned from the table towards the fire and was idly elevating a hand-screen before her face, when she heard the click of a little gate outside.

'Ah, here's the postman!' she said, as a shuffling, active man came through an opening in the shrubbery and across the lawn. She vanished, and met him in the porch, afterwards coming in with her hands behind her

back.

'How many are there? Three for papa, one for Mr. Smith, none for Miss Swancourt. And, papa, look here, one of yours is from--whom do you think?--Lord Luxellian. And it has something HARD in it--a lump of something. I've been feeling it through the envelope, and can't think what it is.'

'What does Luxellian write for, I wonder?' Mr. Swancourt had said simultaneously with her words. He handed Stephen his letter, and took his own, putting on his countenance a higher class of look than was customary, as became a poor gentleman who was going to read a letter from a peer.

Stephen read his missive with a countenance quite the reverse of the vicar's.

'PERCY PLACE, Thursday Evening.

'DEAR SMITH,--Old H. is in a towering rage with you for being so long about the church sketches. Swears you are more trouble than you are worth. He says I am to write and say you are to stay no longer on any consideration--that he would have done it all in three hours very easily. I told him that you were not like an experienced hand, which he seemed to forget, but it did not make much difference. However, between you and me privately, if I were you I would not alarm myself for a day

or so, if I were not inclined to return. I would make out the week and finish my spree. He will blow up just as much if you appear here on Saturday as if you keep away till Monday morning.--Yours very truly,

'SIMPKINS JENKINS.

'Dear me--very awkward!' said Stephen, rather en l'air, and confused with the kind of confusion that assails an understrapper when he has been enlarged by accident to the dimensions of a superior, and is somewhat rudely pared down to his original size.

'What is awkward?' said Miss Swancourt.

Smith by this time recovered his equanimity, and with it the professional dignity of an experienced architect.

'Important business demands my immediate presence in London, I regret to say,' he replied.

'What! Must you go at once?' said Mr. Swancourt, looking over the edge of his letter. 'Important business? A young fellow like you to have important business!'

'The truth is,' said Stephen blushing, and rather ashamed of having

pretended even so slightly to a consequence which did not belong to him,--'the truth is, Mr. Hewby has sent to say I am to come home; and I must obey him.'

'I see; I see. It is politic to do so, you mean. Now I can see more than you think. You are to be his partner. I booked you for that directly I read his letter to me the other day, and the way he spoke of you. He thinks a great deal of you, Mr. Smith, or he wouldn't be so anxious for your return.'

Unpleasant to Stephen such remarks as these could not sound; to have the expectancy of partnership with one of the largest-practising architects in London thrust upon him was cheering, however untenable he felt the idea to be. He saw that, whatever Mr. Hewby might think, Mr. Swancourt certainly thought much of him to entertain such an idea on such slender ground as to be absolutely no ground at all. And then, unaccountably, his speaking face exhibited a cloud of sadness, which a reflection on the remoteness of any such contingency could hardly have sufficed to cause.

Elfride was struck with that look of his; even Mr. Swancourt noticed it.

'Well,' he said cheerfully, 'never mind that now. You must come again on your own account; not on business. Come to see me as a visitor, you know--say, in your holidays--all you town men have holidays like schoolboys. When are they?'

'In August, I believe.'

'Very well; come in August; and then you need not hurry away so. I am glad to get somebody decent to talk to, or at, in this outlandish ultima Thule. But, by the bye, I have something to say--you won't go to-day?'

'No; I need not,' said Stephen hesitatingly. 'I am not obliged to get back before Monday morning.'

'Very well, then, that brings me to what I am going to propose. This is a letter from Lord Luxellian. I think you heard me speak of him as the resident landowner in this district, and patron of this living?'

'I--know of him.'

'He is in London now. It seems that he has run up on business for a day or two, and taken Lady Luxellian with him. He has written to ask me to go to his house, and search for a paper among his private memoranda, which he forgot to take with him.'

'What did he send in the letter?' inquired Elfride.

'The key of a private desk in which the papers are. He doesn't like to trust such a matter to any body else. I have done such things for him before. And what I propose is, that we make an afternoon of it--all

three of us. Go for a drive to Targan Bay, come home by way of Endelstow House; and whilst I am looking over the documents you can ramble about the rooms where you like. I have the run of the house at any time, you know. The building, though nothing but a mass of gables outside, has a splendid hall, staircase, and gallery within; and there are a few good pictures.'

'Yes, there are,' said Stephen.

'Have you seen the place, then?

'I saw it as I came by,' he said hastily.

'Oh yes; but I was alluding to the interior. And the church--St. Eval's--is much older than our St. Agnes' here. I do duty in that and this alternately, you know. The fact is, I ought to have some help; riding across that park for two miles on a wet morning is not at all the thing. If my constitution were not well seasoned, as thank God it is,'--here Mr. Swancourt looked down his front, as if his constitution were visible there,--'I should be coughing and barking all the year round. And when the family goes away, there are only about three servants to preach to when I get there. Well, that shall be the arrangement, then. Elfride, you will like to go?'

Elfride assented; and the little breakfast-party separated. Stephen rose to go and take a few final measurements at the church, the vicar

following him to the door with a mysterious expression of inquiry on his face.

'You'll put up with our not having family prayer this morning, I hope?' he whispered.

'Yes; quite so,' said Stephen.

'To tell you the truth,' he continued in the same undertone, 'we don't make a regular thing of it; but when we have strangers visiting us, I am strongly of opinion that it is the proper thing to do, and I always do it. I am very strict on that point. But you, Smith, there is something in your face which makes me feel quite at home; no nonsense about you, in short. Ah, it reminds me of a splendid story I used to hear when I was a helter-skelter young fellow--such a story! But'--here the vicar shook his head self-forbiddingly, and grimly laughed.

'Was it a good story?' said young Smith, smiling too.

'Oh yes; but 'tis too bad--too bad! Couldn't tell it to you for the world!'

Stephen went across the lawn, hearing the vicar chuckling privately at the recollection as he withdrew.

They started at three o'clock. The gray morning had resolved itself into an afternoon bright with a pale pervasive sunlight, without the sun itself being visible. Lightly they trotted along--the wheels nearly silent, the horse's hoofs clapping, almost ringing, upon the hard, white, turnpike road as it followed the level ridge in a perfectly straight line, seeming to be absorbed ultimately by the white of the sky.

Targan Bay--which had the merit of being easily got at--was duly visited. They then swept round by innumerable lanes, in which not twenty consecutive yards were either straight or level, to the domain of Lord Luxellian. A woman with a double chin and thick neck, like Queen Anne by Dahl, threw open the lodge gate, a little boy standing behind her.

'I'll give him something, poor little fellow,' said Elfride, pulling out her purse and hastily opening it. From the interior of her purse a host of bits of paper, like a flock of white birds, floated into the air, and were blown about in all directions.

'Well, to be sure!' said Stephen with a slight laugh.

'What the dickens is all that?' said Mr. Swancourt. 'Not halves of bank-notes, Elfride?'

Elfride looked annoyed and guilty. 'They are only something of mine, papa,' she faltered, whilst Stephen leapt out, and, assisted by the



lodge-keeper's little boy, crept about round the wheels and horse's hoofs till the papers were all gathered together again. He handed them back to her, and remounted.

'I suppose you are wondering what those scraps were?' she said, as they bowled along up the sycamore avenue. 'And so I may as well tell you. They are notes for a romance I am writing.'

She could not help colouring at the confession, much as she tried to avoid it.

'A story, do you mean?' said Stephen, Mr. Swancourt half listening, and catching a word of the conversation now and then.

'Yes; THE COURT OF KELLYON CASTLE; a romance of the fifteenth century. Such writing is out of date now, I know; but I like doing it.'

'A romance carried in a purse! If a highwayman were to rob you, he would be taken in.'

'Yes; that's my way of carrying manuscript. The real reason is, that I mostly write bits of it on scraps of paper when I am on horseback; and I put them there for convenience.'

'What are you going to do with your romance when you have written it?' said Stephen.

'I don't know,' she replied, and turned her head to look at the prospect.

For by this time they had reached the precincts of Endelstow House. Driving through an ancient gate-way of dun-coloured stone, spanned by the high-shouldered Tudor arch, they found themselves in a spacious court, closed by a facade on each of its three sides. The substantial portions of the existing building dated from the reign of Henry VIII.; but the picturesque and sheltered spot had been the site of an erection of a much earlier date. A licence to crenellate mansum infra manerium suum was granted by Edward II. to 'Hugo Luxellen chivaler;' but though the faint outline of the ditch and mound was visible at points, no sign of the original building remained.

The windows on all sides were long and many-mullioned; the roof lines broken up by dormer lights of the same pattern. The apex stones of these dormers, together with those of the gables, were surmounted by grotesque figures in rampant, passant, and couchant variety. Tall octagonal and twisted chimneys thrust themselves high up into the sky, surpassed in height, however, by some poplars and sycamores at the back, which showed their gently rocking summits over ridge and parapet. In the corners of the court polygonal bays, whose surfaces were entirely occupied by buttresses and windows, broke into the squareness of the enclosure; and a far-projecting oriel, springing from a fantastic series of mouldings, overhung the archway of the chief entrance to the house.

As Mr. Swancourt had remarked, he had the freedom of the mansion in the absence of its owner. Upon a statement of his errand they were all admitted to the library, and left entirely to themselves. Mr. Swancourt was soon up to his eyes in the examination of a heap of papers he had taken from the cabinet described by his correspondent. Stephen and Elfride had nothing to do but to wander about till her father was ready.

Elfride entered the gallery, and Stephen followed her without seeming to do so. It was a long sombre apartment, enriched with fittings a century or so later in style than the walls of the mansion. Pilasters of Renaissance workmanship supported a cornice from which sprang a curved ceiling, panelled in the awkward twists and curls of the period. The old Gothic quarries still remained in the upper portion of the large window at the end, though they had made way for a more modern form of glazing elsewhere.

Stephen was at one end of the gallery looking towards Elfride, who stood in the midst, beginning to feel somewhat depressed by the society of Luxellian shades of cadaverous complexion fixed by Holbein, Kneller, and Lely, and seeming to gaze at and through her in a moralizing mood. The silence, which cast almost a spell upon them, was broken by the sudden opening of a door at the far end.

Out bounded a pair of little girls, lightly yet warmly dressed. Their eyes were sparkling; their hair swinging about and around; their red

mouths laughing with unalloyed gladness.

'Ah, Miss Swancourt: dearest Elfie! we heard you. Are you going to stay here? You are our little mamma, are you not--our big mamma is gone to London,' said one.

'Let me tiss you,' said the other, in appearance very much like the first, but to a smaller pattern.

Their pink cheeks and yellow hair were speedily intermingled with the folds of Elfride's dress; she then stooped and tenderly embraced them both.

'Such an odd thing,' said Elfride, smiling, and turning to Stephen.

'They have taken it into their heads lately to call me "little mamma," because I am very fond of them, and wore a dress the other day something like one of Lady Luxellian's.'

These two young creatures were the Honourable Mary and the Honourable Kate--scarcely appearing large enough as yet to bear the weight of such ponderous prefixes. They were the only two children of Lord and Lady Luxellian, and, as it proved, had been left at home during their parents' temporary absence, in the custody of nurse and governess. Lord Luxellian was dotingly fond of the children; rather indifferent towards his wife, since she had begun to show an inclination not to please him by giving him a boy.

All children instinctively ran after Elfride, looking upon her more as an unusually nice large specimen of their own tribe than as a grown-up elder. It had now become an established rule, that whenever she met them--indoors or out-of-doors, weekdays or Sundays--they were to be severally pressed against her face and bosom for the space of a quarter of a minute, and other-wise made much of on the delightful system of cumulative epithet and caress to which unpractised girls will occasionally abandon themselves.

A look of misgiving by the youngsters towards the door by which they had entered directed attention to a maid-servant appearing from the same quarter, to put an end to this sweet freedom of the poor Honourables Mary and Kate.

'I wish you lived here, Miss Swancourt,' piped one like a melancholy bullfinch.

'So do I,' piped the other like a rather more melancholy bullfinch.

'Mamma can't play with us so nicely as you do. I don't think she ever learnt playing when she was little. When shall we come to see you?'

'As soon as you like, dears.'

'And sleep at your house all night? That's what I mean by coming to see you. I don't care to see people with hats and bonnets on, and all

standing up and walking about.'

'As soon as we can get mamma's permission you shall come and stay as long as ever you like. Good-bye!'

The prisoners were then led off, Elfride again turning her attention to her guest, whom she had left standing at the remote end of the gallery. On looking around for him he was nowhere to be seen. Elfride stepped down to the library, thinking he might have rejoined her father there. But Mr. Swancourt, now cheerfully illuminated by a pair of candles, was still alone, untying packets of letters and papers, and tying them up again.

As Elfride did not stand on a sufficiently intimate footing with the object of her interest to justify her, as a proper young lady, to commence the active search for him that youthful impulsiveness prompted, and as, nevertheless, for a nascent reason connected with those divinely cut lips of his, she did not like him to be absent from her side, she wandered desultorily back to the oak staircase, pouting and casting her eyes about in hope of discerning his boyish figure.

Though daylight still prevailed in the rooms, the corridors were in a depth of shadow--chill, sad, and silent; and it was only by looking along them towards light spaces beyond that anything or anybody could be discerned therein. One of these light spots she found to be caused by a side-door with glass panels in the upper part. Elfride opened it, and

found herself confronting a secondary or inner lawn, separated from the principal lawn front by a shrubbery.

And now she saw a perplexing sight. At right angles to the face of the wing she had emerged from, and within a few feet of the door, juttied out another wing of the mansion, lower and with less architectural character. Immediately opposite to her, in the wall of this wing, was a large broad window, having its blind drawn down, and illuminated by a light in the room it screened.

On the blind was a shadow from somebody close inside it--a person in profile. The profile was unmistakably that of Stephen. It was just possible to see that his arms were uplifted, and that his hands held an article of some kind. Then another shadow appeared--also in profile--and came close to him. This was the shadow of a woman. She turned her back towards Stephen: he lifted and held out what now proved to be a shawl or mantle--placed it carefully--so carefully--round the lady; disappeared; reappeared in her front--fastened the mantle. Did he then kiss her? Surely not. Yet the motion might have been a kiss. Then both shadows swelled to colossal dimensions--grew distorted--vanished.

Two minutes elapsed.

'Ah, Miss Swancourt! I am so glad to find you. I was looking for you,' said a voice at her elbow--Stephen's voice. She stepped into the passage.

'Do you know any of the members of this establishment?' said she.

'Not a single one: how should I?' he replied.