

Chapter VI

'Fare thee weel awhile!'

Simultaneously with the conclusion of Stephen's remark, the sound of the closing of an external door in their immediate neighbourhood reached Elfride's ears. It came from the further side of the wing containing the illuminated room. She then discerned, by the aid of the dusky departing light, a figure, whose sex was undistinguishable, walking down the gravelled path by the parterre towards the river. The figure grew fainter, and vanished under the trees.

Mr. Swancourt's voice was heard calling out their names from a distant corridor in the body of the building. They retraced their steps, and found him with his coat buttoned up and his hat on, awaiting their advent in a mood of self-satisfaction at having brought his search to a successful close. The carriage was brought round, and without further delay the trio drove away from the mansion, under the echoing gateway arch, and along by the leafless sycamores, as the stars began to kindle their trembling lights behind the maze of branches and twigs.

No words were spoken either by youth or maiden. Her unpractised mind was completely occupied in fathoming its recent acquisition. The young man who had inspired her with such novelty of feeling, who had come directly from London on business to her father, having been brought by chance to

Endelstow House had, by some means or other, acquired the privilege of approaching some lady he had found therein, and of honouring her by petits soins of a marked kind,--all in the space of half an hour.

What room were they standing in? thought Elfride. As nearly as she could guess, it was Lord Luxellian's business-room, or office. What people were in the house? None but the governess and servants, as far as she knew, and of these he had professed a total ignorance. Had the person she had indistinctly seen leaving the house anything to do with the performance? It was impossible to say without appealing to the culprit himself, and that she would never do. The more Elfride reflected, the more certain did it appear that the meeting was a chance rencounter, and not an appointment. On the ultimate inquiry as to the individuality of the woman, Elfride at once assumed that she could not be an inferior. Stephen Smith was not the man to care about passages-at-love with women beneath him. Though gentle, ambition was visible in his kindling eyes; he evidently hoped for much; hoped indefinitely, but extensively. Elfride was puzzled, and being puzzled, was, by a natural sequence of girlish sensations, vexed with him. No more pleasure came in recognizing that from liking to attract him she was getting on to love him, boyish as he was and innocent as he had seemed.

They reached the bridge which formed a link between the eastern and western halves of the parish. Situated in a valley that was bounded outwardly by the sea, it formed a point of depression from which the road ascended with great steepness to West Endelstow and the Vicarage.

There was no absolute necessity for either of them to alight, but as it was the vicar's custom after a long journey to humour the horse in making this winding ascent, Elfride, moved by an imitative instinct, suddenly jumped out when Pleasant had just begun to adopt the deliberate stalk he associated with this portion of the road.

The young man seemed glad of any excuse for breaking the silence. 'Why, Miss Swancourt, what a risky thing to do!' he exclaimed, immediately following her example by jumping down on the other side.

'Oh no, not at all,' replied she coldly; the shadow phenomenon at Endelstow House still paramount within her.

Stephen walked along by himself for two or three minutes, wrapped in the rigid reserve dictated by her tone. Then apparently thinking that it was only for girls to pout, he came serenely round to her side, and offered his arm with Castilian gallantry, to assist her in ascending the remaining three-quarters of the steep.

Here was a temptation: it was the first time in her life that Elfride had been treated as a grown-up woman in this way--offered an arm in a manner implying that she had a right to refuse it. Till to-night she had never received masculine attentions beyond those which might be contained in such homely remarks as 'Elfride, give me your hand;' 'Elfride, take hold of my arm,' from her father. Her callow heart made an epoch of the incident; she considered her array of feelings, for and

against. Collectively they were for taking this offered arm; the single one of pique determined her to punish Stephen by refusing.

'No, thank you, Mr. Smith; I can get along better by myself'

It was Elfride's first fragile attempt at browbeating a lover. Fearing more the issue of such an undertaking than what a gentle young man might think of her waywardness, she immediately afterwards determined to please herself by reversing her statement.

'On second thoughts, I will take it,' she said.

They slowly went their way up the hill, a few yards behind the carriage.

'How silent you are, Miss Swancourt!' Stephen observed.

'Perhaps I think you silent too,' she returned.

'I may have reason to be.'

'Scarcely; it is sadness that makes people silent, and you can have none.'

'You don't know: I have a trouble; though some might think it less a trouble than a dilemma.'

'What is it?' she asked impulsively.

Stephen hesitated. 'I might tell,' he said; 'at the same time, perhaps, it is as well----'

She let go his arm and imperatively pushed it from her, tossing her head. She had just learnt that a good deal of dignity is lost by asking a question to which an answer is refused, even ever so politely; for though politeness does good service in cases of requisition and compromise, it but little helps a direct refusal. 'I don't wish to know anything of it; I don't wish it,' she went on. 'The carriage is waiting for us at the top of the hill; we must get in;' and Elfride flitted to the front. 'Papa, here is your Elfride!' she exclaimed to the dusky figure of the old gentleman, as she sprang up and sank by his side without deigning to accept aid from Stephen.

'Ah, yes!' uttered the vicar in artificially alert tones, awaking from a most profound sleep, and suddenly preparing to alight.

'Why, what are you doing, papa? We are not home yet.'

'Oh no, no; of course not; we are not at home yet,' Mr. Swancourt said very hastily, endeavouring to dodge back to his original position with the air of a man who had not moved at all. 'The fact is I was so lost in deep meditation that I forgot whereabouts we were.' And in a minute the vicar was snoring again.

That evening, being the last, seemed to throw an exceptional shade of sadness over Stephen Smith, and the repeated injunctions of the vicar, that he was to come and revisit them in the summer, apparently tended less to raise his spirits than to unearth some misgiving.

He left them in the gray light of dawn, whilst the colours of earth were sombre, and the sun was yet hidden in the east. Elfride had fidgeted all night in her little bed lest none of the household should be awake soon enough to start him, and also lest she might miss seeing again the bright eyes and curly hair, to which their owner's possession of a hidden mystery added a deeper tinge of romance. To some extent--so soon does womanly interest take a solicitous turn--she felt herself responsible for his safe conduct. They breakfasted before daylight; Mr. Swancourt, being more and more taken with his guest's ingenuous appearance, having determined to rise early and bid him a friendly farewell. It was, however, rather to the vicar's astonishment, that he saw Elfride walk in to the breakfast-table, candle in hand.

Whilst William Worm performed his toilet (during which performance the inmates of the vicarage were always in the habit of waiting with exemplary patience), Elfride wandered desultorily to the summer house. Stephen followed her thither. The copse-covered valley was visible from this position, a mist now lying all along its length, hiding the stream which trickled through it, though the observers themselves were in clear

air.

They stood close together, leaning over the rustic balustrading which bounded the arbour on the outward side, and formed the crest of a steep slope beneath Elfride constrainedly pointed out some features of the distant uplands rising irregularly opposite. But the artistic eye was, either from nature or circumstance, very faint in Stephen now, and he only half attended to her description, as if he spared time from some other thought going on within him.

'Well, good-bye,' he said suddenly; 'I must never see you again, I suppose, Miss Swancourt, in spite of invitations.'

His genuine tribulation played directly upon the delicate chords of her nature. She could afford to forgive him for a concealment or two. Moreover, the shyness which would not allow him to look her in the face lent bravery to her own eyes and tongue.

'Oh, DO come again, Mr. Smith!' she said prettily.

'I should delight in it; but it will be better if I do not.'

'Why?'

'Certain circumstances in connection with me make it undesirable. Not on my account; on yours.'

'Goodness! As if anything in connection with you could hurt me,' she said with serene supremacy; but seeing that this plan of treatment was inappropriate, she tuned a smaller note. 'Ah, I know why you will not come. You don't want to. You'll go home to London and to all the stirring people there, and will never want to see us any more!'

'You know I have no such reason.'

'And go on writing letters to the lady you are engaged to, just as before.'

'What does that mean? I am not engaged.'

'You wrote a letter to a Miss Somebody; I saw it in the letter-rack.'

'Pooh! an elderly woman who keeps a stationer's shop; and it was to tell her to keep my newspapers till I get back.'

'You needn't have explained: it was not my business at all.' Miss Elfride was rather relieved to hear that statement, nevertheless. 'And you won't come again to see my father?' she insisted.

'I should like to--and to see you again, but----'

'Will you reveal to me that matter you hide?' she interrupted

petulantly.

'No; not now.'

She could not but go on, graceless as it might seem.

'Tell me this,' she importuned with a trembling mouth. 'Does any meeting of yours with a lady at Endelstow Vicarage clash with--any interest you may take in me?'

He started a little. 'It does not,' he said emphatically; and looked into the pupils of her eyes with the confidence that only honesty can give, and even that to youth alone.

The explanation had not come, but a gloom left her. She could not but believe that utterance. Whatever enigma might lie in the shadow on the blind, it was not an enigma of underhand passion.

She turned towards the house, entering it through the conservatory. Stephen went round to the front door. Mr. Swancourt was standing on the step in his slippers. Worm was adjusting a buckle in the harness, and murmuring about his poor head; and everything was ready for Stephen's departure.

'You named August for your visit. August it shall be; that is, if you care for the society of such a fossilized Tory,' said Mr. Swancourt.

Mr. Smith only responded hesitatingly, that he should like to come again.

'You said you would, and you must,' insisted Elfride, coming to the door and speaking under her father's arm.

Whatever reason the youth may have had for not wishing to enter the house as a guest, it no longer predominated. He promised, and bade them adieu, and got into the pony-carriage, which crept up the slope, and bore him out of their sight.

'I never was so much taken with anybody in my life as I am with that young fellow--never! I cannot understand it--can't understand it anyhow,' said Mr. Swancourt quite energetically to himself; and went indoors.