Chapter VII

'No more of me you knew, my love!'

Stephen Smith revisited Endelstow Vicarage, agreeably to his promise. He had a genuine artistic reason for coming, though no such reason seemed to be required. Six-and-thirty old seat ends, of exquisite fifteenth-century workmanship, were rapidly decaying in an aisle of the church; and it became politic to make drawings of their worm-eaten contours ere they were battered past recognition in the turmoil of the so-called restoration.

He entered the house at sunset, and the world was pleasant again to the two fair-haired ones. A momentary pang of disappointment had, nevertheless, passed through Elfride when she casually discovered that he had not come that minute post-haste from London, but had reached the neighbourhood the previous evening. Surprise would have accompanied the feeling, had she not remembered that several tourists were haunting the coast at this season, and that Stephen might have chosen to do likewise.

They did little besides chat that evening, Mr. Swancourt beginning to question his visitor, closely yet paternally, and in good part, on his hopes and prospects from the profession he had embraced. Stephen gave vague answers. The next day it rained. In the evening, when twenty-four hours of Elfride had completely rekindled her admirer's ardour, a game

of chess was proposed between them.

The game had its value in helping on the developments of their future.

Elfride soon perceived that her opponent was but a learner. She next noticed that he had a very odd way of handling the pieces when castling or taking a man. Antecedently she would have supposed that the same performance must be gone through by all players in the same manner; she was taught by his differing action that all ordinary players, who learn the game by sight, unconsciously touch the men in a stereotyped way. This impression of indescribable oddness in Stephen's touch culminated in speech when she saw him, at the taking of one of her bishops, push it aside with the taking man instead of lifting it as a preliminary to the move.

'How strangely you handle the men, Mr. Smith!'

'Do I? I am sorry for that.'

'Oh no--don't be sorry; it is not a matter great enough for sorrow. But who taught you to play?'

'Nobody, Miss Swancourt,' he said. 'I learnt from a book lent me by my friend Mr. Knight, the noblest man in the world.'

'But you have seen people play?'

'I have never seen the playing of a single game. This is the first time I ever had the opportunity of playing with a living opponent. I have worked out many games from books, and studied the reasons of the different moves, but that is all.'

This was a full explanation of his mannerism; but the fact that a man with the desire for chess should have grown up without being able to see or engage in a game astonished her not a little. She pondered on the circumstance for some time, looking into vacancy and hindering the play.

Mr. Swancourt was sitting with his eyes fixed on the board, but apparently thinking of other things. Half to himself he said, pending the move of Elfride:

'"Quae finis aut quod me manet stipendium?"'

Stephen replied instantly:

'"Effare: jussas cum fide poenas luam."'

'Excellent--prompt--gratifying!' said Mr. Swancourt with feeling, bringing down his hand upon the table, and making three pawns and a knight dance over their borders by the shaking. 'I was musing on those words as applicable to a strange course I am steering--but enough of that. I am delighted with you, Mr. Smith, for it is so seldom in this

desert that I meet with a man who is gentleman and scholar enough to continue a quotation, however trite it may be.'

'I also apply the words to myself,' said Stephen quietly.

'You? The last man in the world to do that, I should have thought.'

'Come,' murmured Elfride poutingly, and insinuating herself between them, 'tell me all about it. Come, construe, construe!'

Stephen looked steadfastly into her face, and said slowly, and in a voice full of a far-off meaning that seemed quaintly premature in one so young:

'Quae finis WHAT WILL BE THE END, aut OR, quod stipendium WHAT FINE,

manet me AWAITS ME? Effare SPEAK OUT; luam I WILL PAY, cum fide WITH

FAITH, jussas poenas THE PENALTY REQUIRED.'

The vicar, who had listened with a critical compression of the lips to this school-boy recitation, and by reason of his imperfect hearing had missed the marked realism of Stephen's tone in the English words, now said hesitatingly: 'By the bye, Mr. Smith (I know you'll excuse my curiosity), though your translation was unexceptionably correct and close, you have a way of pronouncing your Latin which to me seems most peculiar. Not that the pronunciation of a dead language is of much

importance; yet your accents and quantities have a grotesque sound to my ears. I thought first that you had acquired your way of breathing the vowels from some of the northern colleges; but it cannot be so with the quantities. What I was going to ask was, if your instructor in the classics could possibly have been an Oxford or Cambridge man?'

'Yes; he was an Oxford man--Fellow of St. Cyprian's.'

'Really?'

'Oh yes; there's no doubt about it.

'The oddest thing ever I heard of!' said Mr. Swancourt, starting with astonishment. 'That the pupil of such a man----'

'The best and cleverest man in England!' cried Stephen enthusiastically.

'That the pupil of such a man should pronounce Latin in the way you pronounce it beats all I ever heard. How long did he instruct you?'

'Four years.'

'Four years!'

'It is not so strange when I explain,' Stephen hastened to say. 'It was done in this way--by letter. I sent him exercises and construing twice a

week, and twice a week he sent them back to me corrected, with marginal notes of instruction. That is how I learnt my Latin and Greek, such as it is. He is not responsible for my scanning. He has never heard me scan a line.'

'A novel case, and a singular instance of patience!' cried the vicar.

'On his part, not on mine. Ah, Henry Knight is one in a thousand! I remember his speaking to me on this very subject of pronunciation. He says that, much to his regret, he sees a time coming when every man will pronounce even the common words of his own tongue as seems right in his own ears, and be thought none the worse for it; that the speaking age is passing away, to make room for the writing age.'

Both Elfride and her father had waited attentively to hear Stephen go on to what would have been the most interesting part of the story, namely, what circumstances could have necessitated such an unusual method of education. But no further explanation was volunteered; and they saw, by the young man's manner of concentrating himself upon the chess-board, that he was anxious to drop the subject.

The game proceeded. Elfride played by rote; Stephen by thought. It was the cruellest thing to checkmate him after so much labour, she considered. What was she dishonest enough to do in her compassion? To let him checkmate her. A second game followed; and being herself absolutely indifferent as to the result (her playing was above the

average among women, and she knew it), she allowed him to give checkmate again. A final game, in which she adopted the Muzio gambit as her opening, was terminated by Elfride's victory at the twelfth move.

Stephen looked up suspiciously. His heart was throbbing even more excitedly than was hers, which itself had quickened when she seriously set to work on this last occasion. Mr. Swancourt had left the room.

'You have been trifling with me till now!' he exclaimed, his face flushing. 'You did not play your best in the first two games?'

Elfride's guilt showed in her face. Stephen became the picture of vexation and sadness, which, relishable for a moment, caused her the next instant to regret the mistake she had made.

'Mr. Smith, forgive me!' she said sweetly. 'I see now, though I did not at first, that what I have done seems like contempt for your skill. But, indeed, I did not mean it in that sense. I could not, upon my conscience, win a victory in those first and second games over one who fought at such a disadvantage and so manfully.'

He drew a long breath, and murmured bitterly, 'Ah, you are cleverer than I. You can do everything--I can do nothing! O Miss Swancourt!' he burst out wildly, his heart swelling in his throat, 'I must tell you how I love you! All these months of my absence I have worshipped you.'

He leapt from his seat like the impulsive lad that he was, slid round to her side, and almost before she suspected it his arm was round her waist, and the two sets of curls intermingled.

So entirely new was full-blown love to Elfride, that she trembled as much from the novelty of the emotion as from the emotion itself. Then she suddenly withdrew herself and stood upright, vexed that she had submitted unresistingly even to his momentary pressure. She resolved to consider this demonstration as premature.

'You must not begin such things as those,' she said with coquettish hauteur of a very transparent nature 'And--you must not do so again--and papa is coming.'

'Let me kiss you--only a little one,' he said with his usual delicacy, and without reading the factitiousness of her manner.

'No; not one.'

'Only on your cheek?'

'No.'

'Forehead?'

'Certainly not.'

'You care for somebody else, then? Ah, I thought so!'

'I am sure I do not.'

'Nor for me either?'

'How can I tell?' she said simply, the simplicity lying merely in the broad outlines of her manner and speech. There were the semitone of voice and half-hidden expression of eyes which tell the initiated how very fragile is the ice of reserve at these times.

Footsteps were heard. Mr. Swancourt then entered the room, and their private colloquy ended.

The day after this partial revelation, Mr. Swancourt proposed a drive to the cliffs beyond Targan Bay, a distance of three or four miles.

Half an hour before the time of departure a crash was heard in the back yard, and presently Worm came in, saying partly to the world in general, partly to himself, and slightly to his auditors:

'Ay, ay, sure! That frying of fish will be the end of William Worm. They be at it again this morning--same as ever--fizz, fizz, fizz!'

'Your head bad again, Worm?' said Mr. Swancourt. 'What was that noise we

heard in the yard?'

'Ay, sir, a weak wambling man am I; and the frying have been going on in my poor head all through the long night and this morning as usual; and I was so dazed wi' it that down fell a piece of leg-wood across the shaft of the pony-shay, and splintered it off. "Ay," says I, "I feel it as if 'twas my own shay; and though I've done it, and parish pay is my lot if I go from here, perhaps I am as independent as one here and there."'

'Dear me, the shaft of the carriage broken!' cried Elfride. She was disappointed: Stephen doubly so. The vicar showed more warmth of temper than the accident seemed to demand, much to Stephen's uneasiness and rather to his surprise. He had not supposed so much latent sternness could co-exist with Mr. Swancourt's frankness and good-nature.

'You shall not be disappointed,' said the vicar at length. 'It is almost too long a distance for you to walk. Elfride can trot down on her pony, and you shall have my old nag, Smith.'

Elfride exclaimed triumphantly, 'You have never seen me on horseback--Oh, you must!' She looked at Stephen and read his thoughts immediately. 'Ah, you don't ride, Mr. Smith?'

'I am sorry to say I don't.'

'Fancy a man not able to ride!' said she rather pertly.

The vicar came to his rescue. 'That's common enough; he has had other lessons to learn. Now, I recommend this plan: let Elfride ride on horseback, and you, Mr. Smith, walk beside her.'

The arrangement was welcomed with secret delight by Stephen. It seemed to combine in itself all the advantages of a long slow ramble with Elfride, without the contingent possibility of the enjoyment being spoilt by her becoming weary. The pony was saddled and brought round.

'Now, Mr. Smith,' said the lady imperatively, coming downstairs, and appearing in her riding-habit, as she always did in a change of dress, like a new edition of a delightful volume, 'you have a task to perform to-day. These earrings are my very favourite darling ones; but the worst of it is that they have such short hooks that they are liable to be dropped if I toss my head about much, and when I am riding I can't give my mind to them. It would be doing me knight service if you keep your eyes fixed upon them, and remember them every minute of the day, and tell me directly I drop one. They have had such hairbreadth escapes, haven't they, Unity?' she continued to the parlour-maid who was standing at the door.

'Yes, miss, that they have!' said Unity with round-eyed commiseration.

'Once 'twas in the lane that I found one of them,' pursued Elfride reflectively.

'And then 'twas by the gate into Eighteen Acres,' Unity chimed in.

'And then 'twas on the carpet in my own room,' rejoined Elfride merrily.

'And then 'twas dangling on the embroidery of your petticoat, miss; and then 'twas down your back, miss, wasn't it? And oh, what a way you was in, miss, wasn't you? my! until you found it!'

Stephen took Elfride's slight foot upon his hand: 'One, two, three, and up!' she said.

Unfortunately not so. He staggered and lifted, and the horse edged round; and Elfride was ultimately deposited upon the ground rather more forcibly than was pleasant. Smith looked all contrition.

'Never mind,' said the vicar encouragingly; 'try again! 'Tis a little accomplishment that requires some practice, although it looks so easy. Stand closer to the horse's head, Mr. Smith.'

'Indeed, I shan't let him try again,' said she with a microscopic look of indignation. 'Worm, come here, and help me to mount.' Worm stepped forward, and she was in the saddle in a trice.

Then they moved on, going for some distance in silence, the hot air of the valley being occasionally brushed from their faces by a cool breeze,

which wound its way along ravines leading up from the sea.

'I suppose,' said Stephen, 'that a man who can neither sit in a saddle himself nor help another person into one seems a useless incumbrance; but, Miss Swancourt, I'll learn to do it all for your sake; I will, indeed.'

'What is so unusual in you,' she said, in a didactic tone justifiable in a horsewoman's address to a benighted walker, 'is that your knowledge of certain things should be combined with your ignorance of certain other things.'

Stephen lifted his eyes earnestly to hers.

'You know,' he said, 'it is simply because there are so many other things to be learnt in this wide world that I didn't trouble about that particular bit of knowledge. I thought it would be useless to me; but I don't think so now. I will learn riding, and all connected with it, because then you would like me better. Do you like me much less for this?'

She looked sideways at him with critical meditation tenderly rendered.

'Do I seem like LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI?' she began suddenly, without replying to his question. 'Fancy yourself saying, Mr. Smith:

"I sat her on my pacing steed,
And nothing else saw all day long,
For sidelong would she bend, and sing
A fairy's song,
She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna dew;"

and that's all she did.'

'No, no,' said the young man stilly, and with a rising colour.

'"And sure in language strange she said,
I love thee true."'

'Not at all,' she rejoined quickly. 'See how I can gallop. Now, Pansy, off!' And Elfride started; and Stephen beheld her light figure contracting to the dimensions of a bird as she sank into the distance--her hair flowing.

He walked on in the same direction, and for a considerable time could see no signs of her returning. Dull as a flower without the sun he sat down upon a stone, and not for fifteen minutes was any sound of horse or rider to be heard. Then Elfride and Pansy appeared on the hill in a round trot.

'Such a delightful scamper as we have had!' she said, her face flushed and her eyes sparkling. She turned the horse's head, Stephen arose, and they went on again.

'Well, what have you to say to me, Mr. Smith, after my long absence?'

'Do you remember a question you could not exactly answer last night--whether I was more to you than anybody else?' said he.

'I cannot exactly answer now, either.'

'Why can't you?'

'Because I don't know if I am more to you than any one else.'

'Yes, indeed, you are!' he exclaimed in a voice of intensest appreciation, at the same time gliding round and looking into her face.

'Eyes in eyes,' he murmured playfully; and she blushingly obeyed, looking back into his.

'And why not lips on lips?' continued Stephen daringly.

'No, certainly not. Anybody might look; and it would be the death of me. You may kiss my hand if you like.'

He expressed by a look that to kiss a hand through a glove, and that a riding-glove, was not a great treat under the circumstances.

'There, then; I'll take my glove off. Isn't it a pretty white hand? Ah, you don't want to kiss it, and you shall not now!'

'If I do not, may I never kiss again, you severe Elfride! You know I think more of you than I can tell; that you are my queen. I would die for you, Elfride!'

A rapid red again filled her cheeks, and she looked at him meditatively. What a proud moment it was for Elfride then! She was ruling a heart with absolute despotism for the first time in her life.

Stephen stealthily pounced upon her hand.

'No; I won't, I won't!' she said intractably; 'and you shouldn't take me by surprise.'

There ensued a mild form of tussle for absolute possession of the

much-coveted hand, in which the boisterousness of boy and girl was far more prominent than the dignity of man and woman. Then Pansy became restless. Elfride recovered her position and remembered herself.

'You make me behave in not a nice way at all!' she exclaimed, in a tone neither of pleasure nor anger, but partaking of both. 'I ought not to have allowed such a romp! We are too old now for that sort of thing.'

'I hope you don't think me too--too much of a creeping-round sort of man,' said he in a penitent tone, conscious that he too had lost a little dignity by the proceeding.

'You are too familiar; and I can't have it! Considering the shortness of the time we have known each other, Mr. Smith, you take too much upon you. You think I am a country girl, and it doesn't matter how you behave to me!'

'I assure you, Miss Swancourt, that I had no idea of freak in my mind. I wanted to imprint a sweet--serious kiss upon your hand; and that's all.'

'Now, that's creeping round again! And you mustn't look into my eyes so,' she said, shaking her head at him, and trotting on a few paces in advance. Thus she led the way out of the lane and across some fields in the direction of the cliffs. At the boundary of the fields nearest the sea she expressed a wish to dismount. The horse was tied to a post, and they both followed an irregular path, which ultimately terminated upon

a flat ledge passing round the face of the huge blue-black rock at a height about midway between the sea and the topmost verge. There, far beneath and before them, lay the everlasting stretch of ocean; there, upon detached rocks, were the white screaming gulls, seeming ever intending to settle, and yet always passing on. Right and left ranked the toothed and zigzag line of storm-torn heights, forming the series which culminated in the one beneath their feet.

Behind the youth and maiden was a tempting alcove and seat, formed naturally in the beetling mass, and wide enough to admit two or three persons. Elfride sat down, and Stephen sat beside her.

'I am afraid it is hardly proper of us to be here, either,' she said half inquiringly. 'We have not known each other long enough for this kind of thing, have we!'

'Oh yes,' he replied judicially; 'quite long enough.'

'How do you know?'

'It is not length of time, but the manner in which our minutes beat, that makes enough or not enough in our acquaintanceship.'

'Yes, I see that. But I wish papa suspected or knew what a VERY NEW THING I am doing. He does not think of it at all.'

'Darling Elfie, I wish we could be married! It is wrong for me to say it--I know it is--before you know more; but I wish we might be, all the same. Do you love me deeply, deeply?'

'No!' she said in a fluster.

At this point-blank denial, Stephen turned his face away decisively, and preserved an ominous silence; the only objects of interest on earth for him being apparently the three or four-score sea-birds circling in the air afar off.

'I didn't mean to stop you quite,' she faltered with some alarm; and seeing that he still remained silent, she added more anxiously, 'If you say that again, perhaps, I will not be quite--quite so obstinate--if--if you don't like me to be.'

'Oh, my Elfride!' he exclaimed, and kissed her.

It was Elfride's first kiss. And so awkward and unused was she; full of striving--no relenting. There was none of those apparent struggles to get out of the trap which only results in getting further in: no final attitude of receptivity: no easy close of shoulder to shoulder, hand upon hand, face upon face, and, in spite of coyness, the lips in the right place at the supreme moment. That graceful though apparently accidental falling into position, which many have noticed as precipitating the end and making sweethearts the sweeter, was not here.

Why? Because experience was absent. A woman must have had many kisses before she kisses well.

In fact, the art of tendering the lips for these amatory salutes follows the principles laid down in treatises on legerdemain for performing the trick called Forcing a Card. The card is to be shifted nimbly, withdrawn, edged under, and withal not to be offered till the moment the unsuspecting person's hand reaches the pack; this forcing to be done so modestly and yet so coaxingly, that the person trifled with imagines he is really choosing what is in fact thrust into his hand.

Well, there were no such facilities now; and Stephen was conscious of it--first with a momentary regret that his kiss should be spoilt by her confused receipt of it, and then with the pleasant perception that her awkwardness was her charm.

'And you do care for me and love me?' said he.

'Yes.'

'Very much?'

'Yes.'

'And I mustn't ask you if you'll wait for me, and be my wife some day?'

'Why not?' she said naively.

'There is a reason why, my Elfride.'

'Not any one that I know of.'

'Suppose there is something connected with me which makes it almost impossible for you to agree to be my wife, or for your father to countenance such an idea?'

'Nothing shall make me cease to love you: no blemish can be found upon your personal nature. That is pure and generous, I know; and having that, how can I be cold to you?'

'And shall nothing else affect us--shall nothing beyond my nature be a part of my quality in your eyes, Elfie?'

'Nothing whatever,' she said with a breath of relief. 'Is that all? Some outside circumstance? What do I care?'

'You can hardly judge, dear, till you know what has to be judged. For that, we will stop till we get home. I believe in you, but I cannot feel bright.'

'Love is new, and fresh to us as the dew; and we are together. As the lover's world goes, this is a great deal. Stephen, I fancy I see the

difference between me and you--between men and women generally, perhaps.

I am content to build happiness on any accidental basis that may lie near at hand; you are for making a world to suit your happiness.'

'Elfride, you sometimes say things which make you seem suddenly to become five years older than you are, or than I am; and that remark is one. I couldn't think so OLD as that, try how I might....And no lover has ever kissed you before?'

'Never.'

'I knew that; you were so unused. You ride well, but you don't kiss nicely at all; and I was told once, by my friend Knight, that that is an excellent fault in woman.'

'Now, come; I must mount again, or we shall not be home by dinner-time.' And they returned to where Pansy stood tethered. 'Instead of entrusting my weight to a young man's unstable palm,' she continued gaily, 'I prefer a surer "upping-stock" (as the villagers call it), in the form of a gate. There--now I am myself again.'

They proceeded homeward at the same walking pace.

Her blitheness won Stephen out of his thoughtfulness, and each forgot everything but the tone of the moment.

'What did you love me for?' she said, after a long musing look at a flying bird.

'I don't know,' he replied idly.

'Oh yes, you do,' insisted Elfride.

'Perhaps, for your eyes.'

'What of them?--now, don't vex me by a light answer. What of my eyes?'

'Oh, nothing to be mentioned. They are indifferently good.'

'Come, Stephen, I won't have that. What did you love me for?'

'It might have been for your mouth?'

'Well, what about my mouth?'

'I thought it was a passable mouth enough----'

'That's not very comforting.'

'With a pretty pout and sweet lips; but actually, nothing more than what everybody has.'

'Don't make up things out of your head as you go on, there's a dear Stephen. Now--what--did--you--love--me--for?'

'Perhaps, 'twas for your neck and hair; though I am not sure: or for your idle blood, that did nothing but wander away from your cheeks and back again; but I am not sure. Or your hands and arms, that they eclipsed all other hands and arms; or your feet, that they played about under your dress like little mice; or your tongue, that it was of a dear delicate tone. But I am not altogether sure.'

'Ah, that's pretty to say; but I don't care for your love, if it made a mere flat picture of me in that way, and not being sure, and such cold reasoning; but what you FELT I was, you know, Stephen' (at this a stealthy laugh and frisky look into his face), 'when you said to yourself, "I'll certainly love that young lady."'

'I never said it.'

'When you said to yourself, then, "I never will love that young lady."'

'I didn't say that, either.'

'Then was it, "I suppose I must love that young lady?"'

'No.'

'What, then?'

''Twas much more fluctuating--not so definite.'

'Tell me; do, do.'

'It was that I ought not to think about you if I loved you truly.'

'Ah, that I don't understand. There's no getting it out of you. And I'll not ask you ever any more--never more--to say out of the deep reality of your heart what you loved me for.'

'Sweet tantalizer, what's the use? It comes to this sole simple thing: That at one time I had never seen you, and I didn't love you; that then I saw you, and I did love you. Is that enough?'

'Yes; I will make it do....I know, I think, what I love you for. You are nice-looking, of course; but I didn't mean for that. It is because you are so docile and gentle.'

'Those are not quite the correct qualities for a man to be loved for,' said Stephen, in rather a dissatisfied tone of self-criticism. 'Well, never mind. I must ask your father to allow us to be engaged directly we get indoors. It will be for a long time.'

'I like it the better....Stephen, don't mention it till to-morrow.'

'Why?'

'Because, if he should object--I don't think he will; but if he should--we shall have a day longer of happiness from our ignorance....Well, what are you thinking of so deeply?'

'I was thinking how my dear friend Knight would enjoy this scene. I wish he could come here.'

'You seem very much engrossed with him,' she answered, with a jealous little toss. 'He must be an interesting man to take up so much of your attention.'

'Interesting!' said Stephen, his face glowing with his fervour; 'noble, you ought to say.'

'Oh yes, yes; I forgot,' she said half satirically. 'The noblest man in England, as you told us last night.'

'He is a fine fellow, laugh as you will, Miss Elfie.'

'I know he is your hero. But what does he do? anything?'

'He writes.'

'What does he write? I have never heard of his name.'

'Because his personality, and that of several others like him, is absorbed into a huge WE, namely, the impalpable entity called the PRESENT--a social and literary Review.'

'Is he only a reviewer?'

'ONLY, Elfie! Why, I can tell you it is a fine thing to be on the staff of the PRESENT. Finer than being a novelist considerably.'

'That's a hit at me, and my poor COURT OF KELLYON CASTLE.'

'No, Elfride,' he whispered; 'I didn't mean that. I mean that he is really a literary man of some eminence, and not altogether a reviewer. He writes things of a higher class than reviews, though he reviews a book occasionally. His ordinary productions are social and ethical essays--all that the PRESENT contains which is not literary reviewing.'

'I admit he must be talented if he writes for the PRESENT. We have it sent to us irregularly. I want papa to be a subscriber, but he's so conservative. Now the next point in this Mr. Knight--I suppose he is a very good man.'

'An excellent man. I shall try to be his intimate friend some day.'

'But aren't you now?'

'No; not so much as that,' replied Stephen, as if such a supposition were extravagant. 'You see, it was in this way--he came originally from the same place as I, and taught me things; but I am not intimate with him. Shan't I be glad when I get richer and better known, and hob and nob with him!' Stephen's eyes sparkled.

A pout began to shape itself upon Elfride's soft lips. 'You think always of him, and like him better than you do me!'

'No, indeed, Elfride. The feeling is different quite. But I do like him, and he deserves even more affection from me than I give.'

'You are not nice now, and you make me as jealous as possible!' she exclaimed perversely. 'I know you will never speak to any third person of me so warmly as you do to me of him.'

'But you don't understand, Elfride,' he said with an anxious movement. 'You shall know him some day. He is so brilliant--no, it isn't exactly brilliant; so thoughtful--nor does thoughtful express him--that it would charm you to talk to him. He's a most desirable friend, and that isn't half I could say.'

'I don't care how good he is; I don't want to know him, because he comes

between me and you. You think of him night and day, ever so much more than of anybody else; and when you are thinking of him, I am shut out of your mind.'

'No, dear Elfride; I love you dearly.'

'And I don't like you to tell me so warmly about him when you are in the middle of loving me. Stephen, suppose that I and this man Knight of yours were both drowning, and you could only save one of us----'

'Yes--the stupid old proposition--which would I save?

'Well, which? Not me.'

'Both of you,' he said, pressing her pendent hand.

'No, that won't do; only one of us.'

'I cannot say; I don't know. It is disagreeable--quite a horrid idea to have to handle.'

'A-ha, I know. You would save him, and let me drown, drown, drown; and I don't care about your love!'

She had endeavoured to give a playful tone to her words, but the latter speech was rather forced in its gaiety.

At this point in the discussion she trotted off to turn a corner which was avoided by the footpath, the road and the path reuniting at a point a little further on. On again making her appearance she continually managed to look in a direction away from him, and left him in the cool shade of her displeasure. Stephen was soon beaten at this game of indifference. He went round and entered the range of her vision.

'Are you offended, Elfie? Why don't you talk?'

'Save me, then, and let that Mr. Clever of yours drown. I hate him. Now, which would you?'

'Really, Elfride, you should not press such a hard question. It is ridiculous.'

'Then I won't be alone with you any more. Unkind, to wound me so!' She laughed at her own absurdity but persisted.

'Come, Elfie, let's make it up and be friends.'

'Say you would save me, then, and let him drown.'

'I would save you--and him too.'

'And let him drown. Come, or you don't love me!' she teasingly went on.

'And let him drown,' he ejaculated despairingly.

'There; now I am yours!' she said, and a woman's flush of triumph lit her eyes.

'Only one earring, miss, as I'm alive,' said Unity on their entering the hall.

With a face expressive of wretched misgiving, Elfride's hand flew like an arrow to her ear.

'There!' she exclaimed to Stephen, looking at him with eyes full of reproach.

'I quite forgot, indeed. If I had only remembered!' he answered, with a conscience-stricken face.

She wheeled herself round, and turned into the shrubbery. Stephen followed.

'If you had told me to watch anything, Stephen, I should have religiously done it,' she capriciously went on, as soon as she heard him behind her.

'Forgetting is forgivable.'

'Well, you will find it, if you want me to respect you and be engaged to you when we have asked papa.' She considered a moment, and added more seriously, 'I know now where I dropped it, Stephen. It was on the cliff. I remember a faint sensation of some change about me, but I was too absent to think of it then. And that's where it is now, and you must go and look there.'

'I'll go at once.'

And he strode away up the valley, under a broiling sun and amid the deathlike silence of early afternoon. He ascended, with giddy-paced haste, the windy range of rocks to where they had sat, felt and peered about the stones and crannies, but Elfride's stray jewel was nowhere to be seen. Next Stephen slowly retraced his steps, and, pausing at a cross-road to reflect a while, he left the plateau and struck downwards across some fields, in the direction of Endelstow House.

He walked along the path by the river without the slightest hesitation as to its bearing, apparently quite familiar with every inch of the ground. As the shadows began to lengthen and the sunlight to mellow, he passed through two wicket-gates, and drew near the outskirts of Endelstow Park. The river now ran along under the park fence, previous

to entering the grove itself, a little further on.

Here stood a cottage, between the fence and the stream, on a slightly elevated spot of ground, round which the river took a turn. The characteristic feature of this snug habitation was its one chimney in the gable end, its squareness of form disguised by a huge cloak of ivy, which had grown so luxuriantly and extended so far from its base, as to increase the apparent bulk of the chimney to the dimensions of a tower. Some little distance from the back of the house rose the park boundary, and over this were to be seen the sycamores of the grove, making slow inclinations to the just-awakening air.

Stephen crossed the little wood bridge in front, went up to the cottage door, and opened it without knock or signal of any kind.

Exclamations of welcome burst from some person or persons when the door was thrust ajar, followed by the scrape of chairs on a stone floor, as if pushed back by their occupiers in rising from a table. The door was closed again, and nothing could now be heard from within, save a lively chatter and the rattle of plates.