Chapter VIII

'Allen-a-Dale is no baron or lord.'

The mists were creeping out of pools and swamps for their pilgrimages of the night when Stephen came up to the front door of the vicarage. Elfride was standing on the step illuminated by a lemon-hued expanse of western sky.

'You never have been all this time looking for that earring?' she said anxiously.

'Oh no; and I have not found it.'

'Never mind. Though I am much vexed; they are my prettiest. But, Stephen, what ever have you been doing--where have you been? I have been so uneasy. I feared for you, knowing not an inch of the country. I thought, suppose he has fallen over the cliff! But now I am inclined to scold you for frightening me so.'

'I must speak to your father now,' he said rather abruptly; 'I have so much to say to him--and to you, Elfride.'

'Will what you have to say endanger this nice time of ours, and is it that same shadowy secret you allude to so frequently, and will it make

me unhappy?'

'Possibly.'

She breathed heavily, and looked around as if for a prompter.

'Put it off till to-morrow,' she said.

He involuntarily sighed too.

'No; it must come to-night. Where is your father, Elfride?'

'Somewhere in the kitchen garden, I think,' she replied. 'That is his favourite evening retreat. I will leave you now. Say all that's to be said--do all there is to be done. Think of me waiting anxiously for the end.' And she re-entered the house.

She waited in the drawing-room, watching the lights sink to shadows, the shadows sink to darkness, until her impatience to know what had occurred in the garden could no longer be controlled. She passed round the shrubbery, unlatched the garden door, and skimmed with her keen eyes the whole twilighted space that the four walls enclosed and sheltered: they were not there. She mounted a little ladder, which had been used for gathering fruit, and looked over the wall into the field. This field extended to the limits of the glebe, which was enclosed on that side by a privet-hedge. Under the hedge was Mr. Swancourt, walking up and down,

and talking aloud--to himself, as it sounded at first. No: another voice shouted occasional replies; and this interlocutor seemed to be on the other side of the hedge. The voice, though soft in quality, was not Stephen's.

The second speaker must have been in the long-neglected garden of an old manor-house hard by, which, together with a small estate attached, had lately been purchased by a person named Troyton, whom Elfride had never seen. Her father might have struck up an acquaintanceship with some member of that family through the privet-hedge, or a stranger to the neighbourhood might have wandered thither.

Well, there was no necessity for disturbing him.

And it seemed that, after all, Stephen had not yet made his desired communication to her father. Again she went indoors, wondering where Stephen could be. For want of something better to do, she went upstairs to her own little room. Here she sat down at the open window, and, leaning with her elbow on the table and her cheek upon her hand, she fell into meditation.

It was a hot and still August night. Every disturbance of the silence which rose to the dignity of a noise could be heard for miles, and the merest sound for a long distance. So she remained, thinking of Stephen, and wishing he had not deprived her of his company to no purpose, as it appeared. How delicate and sensitive he was, she reflected; and yet he

was man enough to have a private mystery, which considerably elevated him in her eyes. Thus, looking at things with an inward vision, she lost consciousness of the flight of time.

Strange conjunctions of circumstances, particularly those of a trivial everyday kind, are so frequent in an ordinary life, that we grow used to their unaccountableness, and forget the question whether the very long odds against such juxtaposition is not almost a disproof of it being a matter of chance at all. What occurred to Elfride at this moment was a case in point. She was vividly imagining, for the twentieth time, the kiss of the morning, and putting her lips together in the position another such a one would demand, when she heard the identical operation performed on the lawn, immediately beneath her window.

A kiss--not of the quiet and stealthy kind, but decisive, loud, and smart.

Her face flushed and she looked out, but to no purpose. The dark rim of the upland drew a keen sad line against the pale glow of the sky, unbroken except where a young cedar on the lawn, that had outgrown its fellow trees, shot its pointed head across the horizon, piercing the firmamental lustre like a sting.

It was just possible that, had any persons been standing on the grassy portions of the lawn, Elfride might have seen their dusky forms. But the shrubs, which once had merely dotted the glade, had now grown bushy and

large, till they hid at least half the enclosure containing them. The kissing pair might have been behind some of these; at any rate, nobody was in sight.

Had no enigma ever been connected with her lover by his hints and absences, Elfride would never have thought of admitting into her mind a suspicion that he might be concerned in the foregoing enactment. But the reservations he at present insisted on, while they added to the mystery without which perhaps she would never have seriously loved him at all, were calculated to nourish doubts of all kinds, and with a slow flush of jealousy she asked herself, might he not be the culprit?

Elfride glided downstairs on tiptoe, and out to the precise spot on which she had parted from Stephen to enable him to speak privately to her father. Thence she wandered into all the nooks around the place from which the sound seemed to proceed--among the huge laurestines, about the tufts of pampas grasses, amid the variegated hollies, under the weeping wych-elm--nobody was there. Returning indoors she called 'Unity!'

'She is gone to her aunt's, to spend the evening,' said Mr. Swancourt, thrusting his head out of his study door, and letting the light of his candles stream upon Elfride's face--less revealing than, as it seemed to herself, creating the blush of uneasy perplexity that was burning upon her cheek.

'I didn't know you were indoors, papa,' she said with surprise. 'Surely

no light was shining from the window when I was on the lawn?' and she looked and saw that the shutters were still open.

'Oh yes, I am in,' he said indifferently. 'What did you want Unity for? I think she laid supper before she went out.'

'Did she?--I have not been to see--I didn't want her for that.'

Elfride scarcely knew, now that a definite reason was required, what that reason was. Her mind for a moment strayed to another subject, unimportant as it seemed. The red ember of a match was lying inside the fender, which explained that why she had seen no rays from the window was because the candles had only just been lighted.

'I'll come directly,' said the vicar. 'I thought you were out somewhere with Mr. Smith.'

Even the inexperienced Elfride could not help thinking that her father must be wonderfully blind if he failed to perceive what was the nascent consequence of herself and Stephen being so unceremoniously left together; wonderfully careless, if he saw it and did not think about it; wonderfully good, if, as seemed to her by far the most probable supposition, he saw it and thought about it and approved of it. These reflections were cut short by the appearance of Stephen just outside the porch, silvered about the head and shoulders with touches of moonlight, that had begun to creep through the trees.

'Has your trouble anything to do with a kiss on the lawn?' she asked abruptly, almost passionately.

'Kiss on the lawn?'

'Yes!' she said, imperiously now.

'I didn't comprehend your meaning, nor do I now exactly. I certainly have kissed nobody on the lawn, if that is really what you want to know, Elfride.'

'You know nothing about such a performance?'

'Nothing whatever. What makes you ask?'

'Don't press me to tell; it is nothing of importance. And, Stephen, you have not yet spoken to papa about our engagement?'

'No,' he said regretfully, 'I could not find him directly; and then I went on thinking so much of what you said about objections, refusals--bitter words possibly--ending our happiness, that I resolved to put it off till to-morrow; that gives us one more day of delight--delight of a tremulous kind.'

'Yes; but it would be improper to be silent too long, I think,' she said

in a delicate voice, which implied that her face had grown warm. 'I want him to know we love, Stephen. Why did you adopt as your own my thought of delay?'

'I will explain; but I want to tell you of my secret first--to tell you now. It is two or three hours yet to bedtime. Let us walk up the hill to the church.'

Elfride passively assented, and they went from the lawn by a side wicket, and ascended into the open expanse of moonlight which streamed around the lonely edifice on the summit of the hill.

The door was locked. They turned from the porch, and walked hand in hand to find a resting-place in the churchyard. Stephen chose a flat tomb, showing itself to be newer and whiter than those around it, and sitting down himself, gently drew her hand towards him.

'No, not there,' she said.

'Why not here?'

'A mere fancy; but never mind.' And she sat down.

'Elfie, will you love me, in spite of everything that may be said against me?'

'O Stephen, what makes you repeat that so continually and so sadly? You know I will. Yes, indeed,' she said, drawing closer, 'whatever may be said of you--and nothing bad can be--I will cling to you just the same. Your ways shall be my ways until I die.'

'Did you ever think what my parents might be, or what society I originally moved in?'

'No, not particularly. I have observed one or two little points in your manners which are rather quaint--no more. I suppose you have moved in the ordinary society of professional people.'

'Supposing I have not--that none of my family have a profession except me?'

'I don't mind. What you are only concerns me.'

'Where do you think I went to school--I mean, to what kind of school?'

'Dr. Somebody's academy,' she said simply.

'No. To a dame school originally, then to a national school.'

'Only to those! Well, I love you just as much, Stephen, dear Stephen,' she murmured tenderly, 'I do indeed. And why should you tell me these things so impressively? What do they matter to me?'

He held her closer and proceeded:

'What do you think my father is--does for his living, that is to say?'

'He practises some profession or calling, I suppose.'

'No; he is a mason.'

'A Freemason?'

'No; a cottager and journeyman mason.'

Elfride said nothing at first. After a while she whispered:

'That is a strange idea to me. But never mind; what does it matter?'

'But aren't you angry with me for not telling you before?'

'No, not at all. Is your mother alive?'

'Yes.'

'Is she a nice lady?'

'Very--the best mother in the world. Her people had been well-to-do

yeomen for centuries, but she was only a dairymaid.'

'O Stephen!' came from her in whispered exclamation.

'She continued to attend to a dairy long after my father married her,' pursued Stephen, without further hesitation. 'And I remember very well how, when I was very young, I used to go to the milking, look on at the skimming, sleep through the churning, and make believe I helped her. Ah, that was a happy time enough!'

'No, never--not happy.'

'Yes, it was.'

'I don't see how happiness could be where the drudgery of dairy-work had to be done for a living--the hands red and chapped, and the shoes clogged....Stephen, I do own that it seems odd to regard you in the light of--of--having been so rough in your youth, and done menial things of that kind.' (Stephen withdrew an inch or two from her side.) 'But I DO LOVE YOU just the same,' she continued, getting closer under his shoulder again, 'and I don't care anything about the past; and I see that you are all the worthier for having pushed on in the world in such a way.'

'It is not my worthiness; it is Knight's, who pushed me.'

'Ah, always he--always he!'

'Yes, and properly so. Now, Elfride, you see the reason of his teaching me by letter. I knew him years before he went to Oxford, but I had not got far enough in my reading for him to entertain the idea of helping me in classics till he left home. Then I was sent away from the village, and we very seldom met; but he kept up this system of tuition by correspondence with the greatest regularity. I will tell you all the story, but not now. There is nothing more to say now, beyond giving places, persons, and dates.' His voice became timidly slow at this point.

'No; don't take trouble to say more. You are a dear honest fellow to say so much as you have; and it is not so dreadful either. It has become a normal thing that millionaires commence by going up to London with their tools at their back, and half-a-crown in their pockets. That sort of origin is getting so respected,' she continued cheerfully, 'that it is acquiring some of the odour of Norman ancestry.'

'Ah, if I had MADE my fortune, I shouldn't mind. But I am only a possible maker of it as yet.'

'It is quite enough. And so THIS is what your trouble was?'

'I thought I was doing wrong in letting you love me without telling you my story; and yet I feared to do so, Elfie. I dreaded to lose you, and I

was cowardly on that account.'

'How plain everything about you seems after this explanation! Your peculiarities in chess-playing, the pronunciation papa noticed in your Latin, your odd mixture of book-knowledge with ignorance of ordinary social accomplishments, are accounted for in a moment. And has this anything to do with what I saw at Lord Luxellian's?'

'What did you see?'

'I saw the shadow of yourself putting a cloak round a lady. I was at the side door; you two were in a room with the window towards me. You came to me a moment later.'

'She was my mother.'

'Your mother THERE!' She withdrew herself to look at him silently in her interest.

'Elfride,' said Stephen, 'I was going to tell you the remainder to-morrow--I have been keeping it back--I must tell it now, after all. The remainder of my revelation refers to where my parents are. Where do you think they live? You know them--by sight at any rate.'

'I know them!' she said in suspended amazement.

'Yes. My father is John Smith, Lord Luxellian's master-mason, who lives under the park wall by the river.'

'O Stephen! can it be?'

'He built--or assisted at the building of the house you live in, years ago. He put up those stone gate piers at the lodge entrance to Lord Luxellian's park. My grandfather planted the trees that belt in your lawn; my grandmother--who worked in the fields with him--held each tree upright whilst he filled in the earth: they told me so when I was a child. He was the sexton, too, and dug many of the graves around us.'

'And was your unaccountable vanishing on the first morning of your arrival, and again this afternoon, a run to see your father and mother?...I understand now; no wonder you seemed to know your way about the village!'

'No wonder. But remember, I have not lived here since I was nine years old. I then went to live with my uncle, a blacksmith, near Exonbury, in order to be able to attend a national school as a day scholar; there was none on this remote coast then. It was there I met with my friend Knight. And when I was fifteen and had been fairly educated by the school-master--and more particularly by Knight--I was put as a pupil in an architect's office in that town, because I was skilful in the use of the pencil. A full premium was paid by the efforts of my mother and father, rather against the wishes of Lord Luxellian, who likes my

father, however, and thinks a great deal of him. There I stayed till six months ago, when I obtained a situation as improver, as it is called, in a London office. That's all of me.'

'To think YOU, the London visitor, the town man, should have been born here, and have known this village so many years before I did. How strange--how very strange it seems to me!' she murmured.

'My mother curtseyed to you and your father last Sunday,' said Stephen, with a pained smile at the thought of the incongruity. 'And your papa said to her, "I am glad to see you so regular at church, JANE."'

'I remember it, but I have never spoken to her. We have only been here eighteen months, and the parish is so large.'

'Contrast with this,' said Stephen, with a miserable laugh, 'your father's belief in my "blue blood," which is still prevalent in his mind. The first night I came, he insisted upon proving my descent from one of the most ancient west-county families, on account of my second Christian name; when the truth is, it was given me because my grandfather was assistant gardener in the Fitzmaurice-Smith family for thirty years. Having seen your face, my darling, I had not heart to contradict him, and tell him what would have cut me off from a friendly knowledge of you.'

She sighed deeply. 'Yes, I see now how this inequality may be made

to trouble us,' she murmured, and continued in a low, sad whisper, 'I wouldn't have minded if they had lived far away. Papa might have consented to an engagement between us if your connection had been with villagers a hundred miles off; remoteness softens family contrasts. But he will not like--O Stephen, Stephen! what can I do?'

'Do?' he said tentatively, yet with heaviness. 'Give me up; let me go back to London, and think no more of me.'

'No, no; I cannot give you up! This hopelessness in our affairs makes me care more for you....I see what did not strike me at first. Stephen, why do we trouble? Why should papa object? An architect in London is an architect in London. Who inquires there? Nobody. We shall live there, shall we not? Why need we be so alarmed?'

'And Elfie,' said Stephen, his hopes kindling with hers, 'Knight thinks nothing of my being only a cottager's son; he says I am as worthy of his friendship as if I were a lord's; and if I am worthy of his friendship, I am worthy of you, am I not, Elfride?'

'I not only have never loved anybody but you,' she said, instead of giving an answer, 'but I have not even formed a strong friendship, such as you have for Knight. I wish you hadn't. It diminishes me.'

'Now, Elfride, you know better,' he said wooingly. 'And had you really never any sweetheart at all?'

'None that was ever recognized by me as such.'

'But did nobody ever love you?'

'Yes--a man did once; very much, he said.'

'How long ago?'

'Oh, a long time.'

'How long, dearest?

'A twelvemonth.'

'That's not VERY long' (rather disappointedly).

'I said long, not very long.'

'And did he want to marry you?'

'I believe he did. But I didn't see anything in him. He was not good enough, even if I had loved him.'

'May I ask what he was?'

'A farmer.'

'A farmer not good enough--how much better than my family!' Stephen murmured.

'Where is he now?' he continued to Elfride.

'HERE.'

'Here! what do you mean by that?'

'I mean that he is here.'

'Where here?'

'Under us. He is under this tomb. He is dead, and we are sitting on his grave.'

'Elfie,' said the young man, standing up and looking at the tomb, 'how odd and sad that revelation seems! It quite depresses me for the moment.'

'Stephen! I didn't wish to sit here; but you would do so.'

'You never encouraged him?'

'Never by look, word, or sign,' she said solemnly. 'He died of consumption, and was buried the day you first came.'

'Let us go away. I don't like standing by HIM, even if you never loved him. He was BEFORE me.'

'Worries make you unreasonable,' she half pouted, following Stephen at the distance of a few steps. 'Perhaps I ought to have told you before we sat down. Yes; let us go.'