

Chapter IX

'Her father did fume'

Oppressed, in spite of themselves, by a foresight of impending complications, Elfride and Stephen returned down the hill hand in hand. At the door they paused wistfully, like children late at school.

Women accept their destiny more readily than men. Elfride had now resigned herself to the overwhelming idea of her lover's sorry antecedents; Stephen had not forgotten the trifling grievance that Elfride had known earlier admiration than his own.

'What was that young man's name?' he inquired.

'Felix Jethway; a widow's only son.'

'I remember the family.'

'She hates me now. She says I killed him.'

Stephen mused, and they entered the porch.

'Stephen, I love only you,' she tremulously whispered. He pressed her fingers, and the trifling shadow passed away, to admit again the mutual

and more tangible trouble.

The study appeared to be the only room lighted up. They entered, each with a demeanour intended to conceal the inconcealable fact that reciprocal love was their dominant chord. Elfride perceived a man, sitting with his back towards herself, talking to her father. She would have retired, but Mr. Swancourt had seen her.

'Come in,' he said; 'it is only Martin Cannister, come for a copy of the register for poor Mrs. Jethway.'

Martin Cannister, the sexton, was rather a favourite with Elfride. He used to absorb her attention by telling her of his strange experiences in digging up after long years the bodies of persons he had known, and recognizing them by some little sign (though in reality he had never recognized any). He had shrewd small eyes and a great wealth of double chin, which compensated in some measure for considerable poverty of nose.

The appearance of a slip of paper in Cannister's hand, and a few shillings lying on the table in front of him, denoted that the business had been transacted, and the tenor of their conversation went to show that a summary of village news was now engaging the attention of parishioner and parson.

Mr. Cannister stood up and touched his forehead over his eye with his

finger, in respectful salutation of Elfride, gave half as much salute to Stephen (whom he, in common with other villagers, had never for a moment recognized), then sat down again and resumed his discourse.

'Where had I got on to, sir?'

'To driving the pile,' said Mr. Swancourt.

'The pile 'twas. So, as I was saying, Nat was driving the pile in this manner, as I might say.' Here Mr. Cannister held his walking-stick scrupulously vertical with his left hand, and struck a blow with great force on the knob of the stick with his right. 'John was steadying the pile so, as I might say.' Here he gave the stick a slight shake, and looked firmly in the various eyes around to see that before proceeding further his listeners well grasped the subject at that stage. 'Well, when Nat had struck some half-dozen blows more upon the pile, 'a stopped for a second or two. John, thinking he had done striking, put his hand upon the top o' the pile to gie en a pull, and see if 'a were firm in the ground.' Mr. Cannister spread his hand over the top of the stick, completely covering it with his palm. 'Well, so to speak, Nat hadn't maned to stop striking, and when John had put his hand upon the pile, the beetle----'

'Oh dreadful!' said Elfride.

'The beetle was already coming down, you see, sir. Nat just caught sight

of his hand, but couldn't stop the blow in time. Down came the beetle upon poor John Smith's hand, and squashed en to a pummy.'

'Dear me, dear me! poor fellow!' said the vicar, with an intonation like the groans of the wounded in a pianoforte performance of the 'Battle of Prague.'

'John Smith, the master-mason?' cried Stephen hurriedly.

'Ay, no other; and a better-hearted man God A'mighty never made.'

'Is he so much hurt?'

'I have heard,' said Mr. Swancourt, not noticing Stephen, 'that he has a son in London, a very promising young fellow.'

'Oh, how he must be hurt!' repeated Stephen.

'A beetle couldn't hurt very little. Well, sir, good-night t'ye; and ye, sir; and you, miss, I'm sure.'

Mr. Cannister had been making unnoticeable motions of withdrawal, and by the time this farewell remark came from his lips he was just outside the door of the room. He tramped along the hall, stayed more than a minute endeavouring to close the door properly, and then was lost to their hearing.

Stephen had meanwhile turned and said to the vicar:

'Please excuse me this evening! I must leave. John Smith is my father.'

The vicar did not comprehend at first.

'What did you say?' he inquired.

'John Smith is my father,' said Stephen deliberately.

A surplus tinge of redness rose from Mr. Swancourt's neck, and came round over his face, the lines of his features became more firmly defined, and his lips seemed to get thinner. It was evident that a series of little circumstances, hitherto unheeded, were now fitting themselves together, and forming a lucid picture in Mr. Swancourt's mind in such a manner as to render useless further explanation on Stephen's part.

'Indeed,' the vicar said, in a voice dry and without inflection.

This being a word which depends entirely upon its tone for its meaning, Mr. Swancourt's enunciation was equivalent to no expression at all.

'I have to go now,' said Stephen, with an agitated bearing, and a movement as if he scarcely knew whether he ought to run off or stay

longer. 'On my return, sir, will you kindly grant me a few minutes' private conversation?'

'Certainly. Though antecedently it does not seem possible that there can be anything of the nature of private business between us.'

Mr. Swancourt put on his straw hat, crossed the drawing-room, into which the moonlight was shining, and stepped out of the French window into the verandah. It required no further effort to perceive what, indeed, reasoning might have foretold as the natural colour of a mind whose pleasures were taken amid genealogies, good dinners, and patrician reminiscences, that Mr. Swancourt's prejudices were too strong for his generosity, and that Stephen's moments as his friend and equal were numbered, or had even now ceased.

Stephen moved forward as if he would follow the vicar, then as if he would not, and in absolute perplexity whither to turn himself, went awkwardly to the door. Elfride followed lingeringly behind him. Before he had receded two yards from the doorstep, Unity and Ann the housemaid came home from their visit to the village.

'Have you heard anything about John Smith? The accident is not so bad as was reported, is it?' said Elfride intuitively.

'Oh no; the doctor says it is only a bad bruise.'

'I thought so!' cried Elfride gladly.

'He says that, although Nat believes he did not check the beetle as it came down, he must have done so without knowing it--checked it very considerably too; for the full blow would have knocked his hand abroad, and in reality it is only made black-and-blue like.'

'How thankful I am!' said Stephen.

The perplexed Unity looked at him with her mouth rather than with her eyes.

'That will do, Unity,' said Elfride magisterially; and the two maids passed on.

'Elfride, do you forgive me?' said Stephen with a faint smile. 'No man is fair in love;' and he took her fingers lightly in his own.

With her head thrown sideways in the Greuze attitude, she looked a tender reproach at his doubt and pressed his hand. Stephen returned the pressure threefold, then hastily went off to his father's cottage by the wall of Endelstow Park.

'Elfride, what have you to say to this?' inquired her father, coming up immediately Stephen had retired.

With feminine quickness she grasped at any straw that would enable her to plead his cause. 'He had told me of it,' she faltered; 'so that it is not a discovery in spite of him. He was just coming in to tell you.'

'COMING to tell! Why hadn't he already told? I object as much, if not more, to his underhand concealment of this, than I do to the fact itself. It looks very much like his making a fool of me, and of you too. You and he have been about together, and corresponding together, in a way I don't at all approve of--in a most unseemly way. You should have known how improper such conduct is. A woman can't be too careful not to be seen alone with I-don't-know-whom.'

'You saw us, papa, and have never said a word.'

'My fault, of course; my fault. What the deuce could I be thinking of! He, a villager's son; and we, Swancourts, connections of the Luxellians. We have been coming to nothing for centuries, and now I believe we have got there. What shall I next invite here, I wonder!'

Elfride began to cry at this very unpropitious aspect of affairs.

'O papa, papa, forgive me and him! We care so much for one another, papa--O, so much! And what he was going to ask you is, if you will allow of an engagement between us till he is a gentleman as good as you. We are not in a hurry, dear papa; we don't want in the least to marry now; not until he is richer. Only will you let us be engaged, because I love him so, and he loves me?'

Mr. Swancourt's feelings were a little touched by this appeal, and he was annoyed that such should be the case. 'Certainly not!' he replied. He pronounced the inhibition lengthily and sonorously, so that the 'not' sounded like 'n-o-o-o-t!'

'No, no, no; don't say it!'

'Foh! A fine story. It is not enough that I have been deluded and disgraced by having him here,--the son of one of my village peasants,--but now I am to make him my son-in-law! Heavens above us, are you mad, Elfride?'

'You have seen his letters come to me ever since his first visit, papa, and you knew they were a sort of--love-letters; and since he has been here you have let him be alone with me almost entirely; and you guessed, you must have guessed, what we were thinking of, and doing, and you didn't stop him. Next to love-making comes love-winning, and you knew it would come to that, papa.'

The vicar parried this common-sense thrust. 'I know--since you press me so--I know I did guess some childish attachment might arise between you; I own I did not take much trouble to prevent it; but I have not particularly countenanced it; and, Elfride, how can you expect that I should now? It is impossible; no father in England would hear of such a thing.'

'But he is the same man, papa; the same in every particular; and how can he be less fit for me than he was before?'

'He appeared a young man with well-to-do friends, and a little property; but having neither, he is another man.'

'You inquired nothing about him?'

'I went by Hewby's introduction. He should have told me. So should the young man himself; of course he should. I consider it a most dishonourable thing to come into a man's house like a treacherous I-don't-know-what.'

'But he was afraid to tell you, and so should I have been. He loved me too well to like to run the risk. And as to speaking of his friends on his first visit, I don't see why he should have done so at all. He came here on business: it was no affair of ours who his parents were. And then he knew that if he told you he would never be asked here, and would perhaps never see me again. And he wanted to see me. Who can blame him for trying, by any means, to stay near me--the girl he loves? All is fair in love. I have heard you say so yourself, papa; and you yourself would have done just as he has--so would any man.'

'And any man, on discovering what I have discovered, would also do as I do, and mend my mistake; that is, get shot of him again, as soon as the

laws of hospitality will allow.' But Mr. Swancourt then remembered that he was a Christian. 'I would not, for the world, seem to turn him out of doors,' he added; 'but I think he will have the tact to see that he cannot stay long after this, with good taste.'

'He will, because he's a gentleman. See how graceful his manners are,' Elfride went on; though perhaps Stephen's manners, like the feats of Euryalus, owed their attractiveness in her eyes rather to the attractiveness of his person than to their own excellence.

'Ay; anybody can be what you call graceful, if he lives a little time in a city, and keeps his eyes open. And he might have picked up his gentlemanliness by going to the galleries of theatres, and watching stage drawing-room manners. He reminds me of one of the worst stories I ever heard in my life.'

'What story was that?'

'Oh no, thank you! I wouldn't tell you such an improper matter for the world!'

'If his father and mother had lived in the north or east of England,' gallantly persisted Elfride, though her sobs began to interrupt her articulation, 'anywhere but here--you--would have--only regarded--HIM, and not THEM! His station--would have--been what--his profession makes it,--and not fixed by--his father's humble position--at all; whom he

never lives with--now. Though John Smith has saved lots of money, and is better off than we are, they say, or he couldn't have put his son to such an expensive profession. And it is clever and--honourable--of Stephen, to be the best of his family.'

'Yes. "Let a beast be lord of beasts, and his crib shall stand at the king's mess."'

'You insult me, papa!' she burst out. 'You do, you do! He is my own Stephen, he is!'

'That may or may not be true, Elfride,' returned her father, again uncomfortably agitated in spite of himself 'You confuse future probabilities with present facts,--what the young man may be with what he is. We must look at what he is, not what an improbable degree of success in his profession may make him. The case is this: the son of a working-man in my parish who may or may not be able to buy me up--a youth who has not yet advanced so far into life as to have any income of his own deserving the name, and therefore of his father's degree as regards station--wants to be engaged to you. His family are living in precisely the same spot in England as yours, so throughout this county--which is the world to us--you would always be known as the wife of Jack Smith the mason's son, and not under any circumstances as the wife of a London professional man. It is the drawback, not the compensating fact, that is talked of always. There, say no more. You may argue all night, and prove what you will; I'll stick to my words.'

Elfride looked silently and hopelessly out of the window with large heavy eyes and wet cheeks.

'I call it great temerity--and long to call it audacity--in Hewby,' resumed her father. 'I never heard such a thing--giving such a hobbledehoy native of this place such an introduction to me as he did. Naturally you were deceived as well as I was. I don't blame you at all, so far.' He went and searched for Mr. Hewby's original letter. 'Here's what he said to me: "Dear Sir,--Agreeably to your request of the 18th instant, I have arranged to survey and make drawings," et cetera. "My assistant, Mr. Stephen Smith,"--assistant, you see he called him, and naturally I understood him to mean a sort of partner. Why didn't he say "clerk"?''

'They never call them clerks in that profession, because they do not write. Stephen--Mr. Smith--told me so. So that Mr. Hewby simply used the accepted word.'

'Let me speak, please, Elfride! My assistant, Mr. Stephen Smith, will leave London by the early train to-morrow morning...MANY THANKS FOR YOUR PROPOSAL TO ACCOMMODATE HIM...YOU MAY PUT EVERY CONFIDENCE IN HIM, and may rely upon his discernment in the matter of church architecture." Well, I repeat that Hewby ought to be ashamed of himself for making so much of a poor lad of that sort.'

'Professional men in London,' Elfride argued, 'don't know anything about their clerks' fathers and mothers. They have assistants who come to their offices and shops for years, and hardly even know where they live. What they can do--what profits they can bring the firm--that's all London men care about. And that is helped in him by his faculty of being uniformly pleasant.'

'Uniform pleasantness is rather a defect than a faculty. It shows that a man hasn't sense enough to know whom to despise.'

'It shows that he acts by faith and not by sight, as those you claim succession from directed.'

'That's some more of what he's been telling you, I suppose! Yes, I was inclined to suspect him, because he didn't care about sauces of any kind. I always did doubt a man's being a gentleman if his palate had no acquired tastes. An unedified palate is the irrepressible cloven foot of the upstart. The idea of my bringing out a bottle of my '40 Martinez--only eleven of them left now--to a man who didn't know it from eighteenpenny! Then the Latin line he gave to my quotation; it was very cut-and-dried, very; or I, who haven't looked into a classical author for the last eighteen years, shouldn't have remembered it. Well, Elfride, you had better go to your room; you'll get over this bit of tomfoolery in time.'

'No, no, no, papa,' she moaned. For of all the miseries attaching to miserable love, the worst is the misery of thinking that the passion which is the cause of them all may cease.

'Elfride,' said her father with rough friendliness, 'I have an excellent scheme on hand, which I cannot tell you of now. A scheme to benefit you and me. It has been thrust upon me for some little time--yes, thrust upon me--but I didn't dream of its value till this afternoon, when the revelation came. I should be most unwise to refuse to entertain it.'

'I don't like that word,' she returned wearily. 'You have lost so much already by schemes. Is it those wretched mines again?'

'No; not a mining scheme.'

'Railways?'

'Nor railways. It is like those mysterious offers we see advertised, by which any gentleman with no brains at all may make so much a week without risk, trouble, or soiling his fingers. However, I am intending to say nothing till it is settled, though I will just say this much, that you soon may have other fish to fry than to think of Stephen Smith. Remember, I wish, not to be angry, but friendly, to the young man; for your sake I'll regard him as a friend in a certain sense. But this is enough; in a few days you will be quite my way of thinking. There, now, go to your bedroom. Unity shall bring you up some supper. I wish you not

to be here when he comes back.'