Chapter X

'Beneath the shelter of an aged tree.'

Stephen retraced his steps towards the cottage he had visited only two or three hours previously. He drew near and under the rich foliage growing about the outskirts of Endelstow Park, the spotty lights and shades from the shining moon maintaining a race over his head and down his back in an endless gambol. When he crossed the plank bridge and entered the garden-gate, he saw an illuminated figure coming from the enclosed plot towards the house on the other side. It was his father, with his hand in a sling, taking a general moonlight view of the garden, and particularly of a plot of the youngest of young turnips, previous to closing the cottage for the night.

He saluted his son with customary force. 'Hallo, Stephen! We should ha' been in bed in another ten minutes. Come to see what's the matter wi' me, I suppose, my lad?'

The doctor had come and gone, and the hand had been pronounced as injured but slightly, though it might possibly have been considered a far more serious case if Mr. Smith had been a more important man. Stephen's anxious inquiry drew from his father words of regret at the inconvenience to the world of his doing nothing for the next two days, rather than of concern for the pain of the accident. Together they

entered the house.

John Smith--brown as autumn as to skin, white as winter as to clothes--was a satisfactory specimen of the village artificer in stone. In common with most rural mechanics, he had too much individuality to be a typical 'working-man'--a resultant of that beach-pebble attrition with his kind only to be experienced in large towns, which metamorphoses the unit Self into a fraction of the unit Class.

There was not the speciality in his labour which distinguishes the handicraftsmen of towns. Though only a mason, strictly speaking, he was not above handling a brick, if bricks were the order of the day; or a slate or tile, if a roof had to be covered before the wet weather set in, and nobody was near who could do it better. Indeed, on one or two occasions in the depth of winter, when frost peremptorily forbids all use of the trowel, making foundations to settle, stones to fly, and mortar to crumble, he had taken to felling and sawing trees. Moreover, he had practised gardening in his own plot for so many years that, on an emergency, he might have made a living by that calling.

Probably our countryman was not such an accomplished artificer in a particular direction as his town brethren in the trades. But he was, in truth, like that clumsy pin-maker who made the whole pin, and who was despised by Adam Smith on that account and respected by Macaulay, much more the artist nevertheless.

Appearing now, indoors, by the light of the candle, his stalwart healthiness was a sight to see. His beard was close and knotted as that of a chiselled Hercules; his shirt sleeves were partly rolled up, his waistcoat unbuttoned; the difference in hue between the snowy linen and the ruddy arms and face contrasting like the white of an egg and its yolk. Mrs. Smith, on hearing them enter, advanced from the pantry.

Mrs. Smith was a matron whose countenance addressed itself to the mind rather than to the eye, though not exclusively. She retained her personal freshness even now, in the prosy afternoon-time of her life; but what her features were primarily indicative of was a sound common sense behind them; as a whole, appearing to carry with them a sort of argumentative commentary on the world in general.

The details of the accident were then rehearsed by Stephen's father, in the dramatic manner also common to Martin Cannister, other individuals of the neighbourhood, and the rural world generally. Mrs. Smith threw in her sentiments between the acts, as Coryphaeus of the tragedy, to make the description complete. The story at last came to an end, as the longest will, and Stephen directed the conversation into another channel.

'Well, mother, they know everything about me now,' he said quietly.

'Well done!' replied his father; 'now my mind's at peace.'

'I blame myself--I never shall forgive myself--for not telling them before,' continued the young man.

Mrs. Smith at this point abstracted her mind from the former subject. 'I don't see what you have to grieve about, Stephen,' she said. 'People who accidentally get friends don't, as a first stroke, tell the history of their families.'

'Ye've done no wrong, certainly,' said his father.

'No; but I should have spoken sooner. There's more in this visit of mine than you think--a good deal more.'

'Not more than I think,' Mrs. Smith replied, looking contemplatively at him. Stephen blushed; and his father looked from one to the other in a state of utter incomprehension.

'She's a pretty piece enough,' Mrs. Smith continued, 'and very lady-like and clever too. But though she's very well fit for you as far as that is, why, mercy 'pon me, what ever do you want any woman at all for yet?'

John made his naturally short mouth a long one, and wrinkled his forehead, 'That's the way the wind d'blow, is it?' he said.

'Mother,' exclaimed Stephen, 'how absurdly you speak! Criticizing whether she's fit for me or no, as if there were room for doubt on

the matter! Why, to marry her would be the great blessing of my life--socially and practically, as well as in other respects. No such good fortune as that, I'm afraid; she's too far above me. Her family doesn't want such country lads as I in it.'

'Then if they don't want you, I'd see them dead corpses before I'd want them, and go to better families who do want you.'

'Ah, yes; but I could never put up with the distaste of being welcomed among such people as you mean, whilst I could get indifference among such people as hers.'

'What crazy twist o' thinking will enter your head next?' said his mother. 'And come to that, she's not a bit too high for you, or you too low for her. See how careful I be to keep myself up. I'm sure I never stop for more than a minute together to talk to any journeymen people; and I never invite anybody to our party o' Christmases who are not in business for themselves. And I talk to several toppermost carriage people that come to my lord's without saying ma'am or sir to 'em, and they take it as quiet as lambs.'

'You curtseyed to the vicar, mother; and I wish you hadn't.'

'But it was before he called me by my Christian name, or he would have got very little curtseying from me!' said Mrs. Smith, bridling and sparkling with vexation. 'You go on at me, Stephen, as if I were your

worst enemy! What else could I do with the man to get rid of him, banging it into me and your father by side and by seam, about his greatness, and what happened when he was a young fellow at college, and I don't know what-all; the tongue o' en flopping round his mouth like a mop-rag round a dairy. That 'a did, didn't he, John?'

'That's about the size o't,' replied her husband.

'Every woman now-a-days,' resumed Mrs. Smith, 'if she marry at all, must expect a father-in-law of a rank lower than her father. The men have gone up so, and the women have stood still. Every man you meet is more the dand than his father; and you are just level wi' her.'

'That's what she thinks herself.'

'It only shows her sense. I knew she was after 'ee, Stephen--I knew it.'

'After me! Good Lord, what next!'

'And I really must say again that you ought not to be in such a hurry, and wait for a few years. You might go higher than a bankrupt pa'son's girl then.'

'The fact is, mother,' said Stephen impatiently, 'you don't know anything about it. I shall never go higher, because I don't want to, nor should I if I lived to be a hundred. As to you saying that she's after

me, I don't like such a remark about her, for it implies a scheming woman, and a man worth scheming for, both of which are not only untrue, but ludicrously untrue, of this case. Isn't it so, father?'

'I'm afraid I don't understand the matter well enough to gie my opinion,' said his father, in the tone of the fox who had a cold and could not smell.

'She couldn't have been very backward anyhow, considering the short time you have known her,' said his mother. 'Well I think that five years hence you'll be plenty young enough to think of such things. And really she can very well afford to wait, and will too, take my word. Living down in an out-step place like this, I am sure she ought to be very thankful that you took notice of her. She'd most likely have died an old maid if you hadn't turned up.'

'All nonsense,' said Stephen, but not aloud.

'A nice little thing she is,' Mrs. Smith went on in a more complacent tone now that Stephen had been talked down; 'there's not a word to say against her, I'll own. I see her sometimes decked out like a horse going to fair, and I admire her for't. A perfect little lady. But people can't help their thoughts, and if she'd learnt to make figures instead of letters when she was at school 'twould have been better for her pocket; for as I said, there never were worse times for such as she than now.'

'Now, now, mother!' said Stephen with smiling deprecation.

'But I will!' said his mother with asperity. 'I don't read the papers for nothing, and I know men all move up a stage by marriage. Men of her class, that is, parsons, marry squires' daughters; squires marry lords' daughters; lords marry dukes' daughters; dukes marry queens' daughters. All stages of gentlemen mate a stage higher; and the lowest stage of gentlewomen are left single, or marry out of their class.'

'But you said just now, dear mother----' retorted Stephen, unable to resist the temptation of showing his mother her inconsistency. Then he paused.

'Well, what did I say?' And Mrs. Smith prepared her lips for a new campaign.

Stephen, regretting that he had begun, since a volcano might be the consequence, was obliged to go on.

'You said I wasn't out of her class just before.'

'Yes, there, there! That's you; that's my own flesh and blood. I'll warrant that you'll pick holes in everything your mother says, if you can, Stephen. You are just like your father for that; take anybody's part but mine. Whilst I am speaking and talking and trying and slaving away for your good, you are waiting to catch me out in that way. So you

are in her class, but 'tis what HER people would CALL marrying out of her class. Don't be so quarrelsome, Stephen!'

Stephen preserved a discreet silence, in which he was imitated by his father, and for several minutes nothing was heard but the ticking of the green-faced case-clock against the wall.

'I'm sure,' added Mrs. Smith in a more philosophic tone, and as a terminative speech, 'if there'd been so much trouble to get a husband in my time as there is in these days--when you must make a god-almighty of a man to get en to hae ye--I'd have trod clay for bricks before I'd ever have lowered my dignity to marry, or there's no bread in nine loaves.'

The discussion now dropped, and as it was getting late, Stephen bade his parents farewell for the evening, his mother none the less warmly for their sparring; for although Mrs. Smith and Stephen were always contending, they were never at enmity.

'And possibly,' said Stephen, 'I may leave here altogether to-morrow; I don't know. So that if I shouldn't call again before returning to London, don't be alarmed, will you?'

'But didn't you come for a fortnight?' said his mother. 'And haven't you a month's holiday altogether? They are going to turn you out, then?'

'Not at all. I may stay longer; I may go. If I go, you had better say

nothing about my having been here, for her sake. At what time of the morning does the carrier pass Endelstow lane?'

'Seven o'clock.'

And then he left them. His thoughts were, that should the vicar permit him to become engaged, to hope for an engagement, or in any way to think of his beloved Elfride, he might stay longer. Should he be forbidden to think of any such thing, he resolved to go at once. And the latter, even to young hopefulness, seemed the more probable alternative.

Stephen walked back to the vicarage through the meadows, as he had come, surrounded by the soft musical purl of the water through little weirs, the modest light of the moon, the freshening smell of the dews out-spread around. It was a time when mere seeing is meditation, and meditation peace. Stephen was hardly philosopher enough to avail himself of Nature's offer. His constitution was made up of very simple particulars; was one which, rare in the spring-time of civilizations, seems to grow abundant as a nation gets older, individuality fades, and education spreads; that is, his brain had extraordinary receptive powers, and no great creativeness. Quickly acquiring any kind of knowledge he saw around him, and having a plastic adaptability more common in woman than in man, he changed colour like a chameleon as the society he found himself in assumed a higher and more artificial tone. He had not many original ideas, and yet there was scarcely an idea to which, under proper training, he could not have added a respectable

co-ordinate.

He saw nothing outside himself to-night; and what he saw within was a weariness to his flesh. Yet to a dispassionate observer, his pretensions to Elfride, though rather premature, were far from absurd as marriages go, unless the accidental proximity of simple but honest parents could be said to make them so.

The clock struck eleven when he entered the house. Elfride had been waiting with scarcely a movement since he departed. Before he had spoken to her she caught sight of him passing into the study with her father. She saw that he had by some means obtained the private interview he desired.

A nervous headache had been growing on the excitable girl during the absence of Stephen, and now she could do nothing beyond going up again to her room as she had done before. Instead of lying down she sat again in the darkness without closing the door, and listened with a beating heart to every sound from downstairs. The servants had gone to bed. She ultimately heard the two men come from the study and cross to the dining-room, where supper had been lingering for more than an hour. The door was left open, and she found that the meal, such as it was, passed off between her father and her lover without any remark, save commonplaces as to cucumbers and melons, their wholesomeness and culture, uttered in a stiff and formal way. It seemed to prefigure failure.

Shortly afterwards Stephen came upstairs to his bedroom, and was almost immediately followed by her father, who also retired for the night. Not inclined to get a light, she partly undressed and sat on the bed, where she remained in pained thought for some time, possibly an hour. Then rising to close her door previously to fully unrobing, she saw a streak of light shining across the landing. Her father's door was shut, and he could be heard snoring regularly. The light came from Stephen's room, and the slight sounds also coming thence emphatically denoted what he was doing. In the perfect silence she could hear the closing of a lid and the clicking of a lock,--he was fastening his hat-box. Then the buckling of straps and the click of another key,--he was securing his portmanteau. With trebled foreboding she opened her door softly, and went towards his. One sensation pervaded her to distraction. Stephen, her handsome youth and darling, was going away, and she might never see him again except in secret and in sadness--perhaps never more. At any rate, she could no longer wait till the morning to hear the result of the interview, as she had intended. She flung her dressing-gown round her, tapped lightly at his door, and whispered 'Stephen!' He came instantly, opened the door, and stepped out.

'Tell me; are we to hope?'

He replied in a disturbed whisper, and a tear approached its outlet, though none fell.

'I am not to think of such a preposterous thing--that's what he said. And I am going to-morrow. I should have called you up to bid you good-bye.'

'But he didn't say you were to go--O Stephen, he didn't say that?'

'No; not in words. But I cannot stay.'

'Oh, don't, don't go! Do come and let us talk. Let us come down to the drawing-room for a few minutes; he will hear us here.'

She preceded him down the staircase with the taper light in her hand, looking unnaturally tall and thin in the long dove-coloured dressing-gown she wore. She did not stop to think of the propriety or otherwise of this midnight interview under such circumstances. She thought that the tragedy of her life was beginning, and, for the first time almost, felt that her existence might have a grave side, the shade of which enveloped and rendered invisible the delicate gradations of custom and punctilio. Elfride softly opened the drawing-room door and they both went in. When she had placed the candle on the table, he enclosed her with his arms, dried her eyes with his handkerchief, and kissed their lids.

'Stephen, it is over--happy love is over; and there is no more sunshine now!'

'I will make a fortune, and come to you, and have you. Yes, I will!'

'Papa will never hear of it--never--never! You don't know him. I do. He is either biassed in favour of a thing, or prejudiced against it. Argument is powerless against either feeling.'

'No; I won't think of him so,' said Stephen. 'If I appear before him some time hence as a man of established name, he will accept me--I know he will. He is not a wicked man.'

'No, he is not wicked. But you say "some time hence," as if it were no time. To you, among bustle and excitement, it will be comparatively a short time, perhaps; oh, to me, it will be its real length trebled! Every summer will be a year--autumn a year--winter a year! O Stephen! and you may forget me!'

Forget: that was, and is, the real sting of waiting to fond-hearted woman. The remark awoke in Stephen the converse fear. 'You, too, may be persuaded to give me up, when time has made me fainter in your memory. For, remember, your love for me must be nourished in secret; there will be no long visits from me to support you. Circumstances will always tend to obliterate me.'

'Stephen,' she said, filled with her own misgivings, and unheeding his last words, 'there are beautiful women where you live--of course I know there are--and they may win you away from me.' Her tears came visibly

as she drew a mental picture of his faithlessness. 'And it won't be your fault,' she continued, looking into the candle with doleful eyes. 'No! You will think that our family don't want you, and get to include me with them. And there will be a vacancy in your heart, and some others will be let in.'

'I could not, I would not. Elfie, do not be so full of forebodings.'

'Oh yes, they will,' she replied. 'And you will look at them, not caring at first, and then you will look and be interested, and after a while you will think, "Ah, they know all about city life, and assemblies, and coteries, and the manners of the titled, and poor little Elfie, with all the fuss that's made about her having me, doesn't know about anything but a little house and a few cliffs and a space of sea, far away." And then you'll be more interested in them, and they'll make you have them instead of me, on purpose to be cruel to me because I am silly, and they are clever and hate me. And I hate them, too; yes, I do!'

Her impulsive words had power to impress him at any rate with the recognition of the uncertainty of all that is not accomplished. And, worse than that general feeling, there of course remained the sadness which arose from the special features of his own case. However remote a desired issue may be, the mere fact of having entered the groove which leads to it, cheers to some extent with a sense of accomplishment. Had Mr. Swancourt consented to an engagement of no less length than ten years, Stephen would have been comparatively cheerful in waiting; they

would have felt that they were somewhere on the road to Cupid's garden. But, with a possibility of a shorter probation, they had not as yet any prospect of the beginning; the zero of hope had yet to be reached. Mr. Swancourt would have to revoke his formidable words before the waiting for marriage could even set in. And this was despair.

'I wish we could marry now,' murmured Stephen, as an impossible fancy.

'So do I,' said she also, as if regarding an idle dream. ''Tis the only thing that ever does sweethearts good!'

'Secretly would do, would it not, Elfie?'

'Yes, secretly would do; secretly would indeed be best,' she said, and went on reflectively: 'All we want is to render it absolutely impossible for any future circumstance to upset our future intention of being happy together; not to begin being happy now.'

'Exactly,' he murmured in a voice and manner the counterpart of hers. 'To marry and part secretly, and live on as we are living now; merely to put it out of anybody's power to force you away from me, dearest.'

'Or you away from me, Stephen.'

'Or me from you. It is possible to conceive a force of circumstance strong enough to make any woman in the world marry against her will: no

conceivable pressure, up to torture or starvation, can make a woman once married to her lover anybody else's wife.'

Now up to this point the idea of an immediate secret marriage had been held by both as an untenable hypothesis, wherewith simply to beguile a miserable moment. During a pause which followed Stephen's last remark, a fascinating perception, then an alluring conviction, flashed along the brain of both. The perception was that an immediate marriage COULD be contrived; the conviction that such an act, in spite of its daring, its fathomless results, its deceptiveness, would be preferred by each to the life they must lead under any other conditions.

The youth spoke first, and his voice trembled with the magnitude of the conception he was cherishing. 'How strong we should feel, Elfride! going on our separate courses as before, without the fear of ultimate separation! O Elfride! think of it; think of it!'

It is certain that the young girl's love for Stephen received a fanning from her father's opposition which made it blaze with a dozen times the intensity it would have exhibited if left alone. Never were conditions more favourable for developing a girl's first passing fancy for a handsome boyish face--a fancy rooted in inexperience and nourished by seclusion--into a wild unreflecting passion fervid enough for anything. All the elements of such a development were there, the chief one being hopelessness--a necessary ingredient always to perfect the mixture of feelings united under the name of loving to distraction.

'We would tell papa soon, would we not?' she inquired timidly. 'Nobody else need know. He would then be convinced that hearts cannot be played with; love encouraged be ready to grow, love discouraged be ready to die, at a moment's notice. Stephen, do you not think that if marriages against a parent's consent are ever justifiable, they are when young people have been favoured up to a point, as we have, and then have had that favour suddenly withdrawn?'

'Yes. It is not as if we had from the beginning acted in opposition to your papa's wishes. Only think, Elfie, how pleasant he was towards me but six hours ago! He liked me, praised me, never objected to my being alone with you.'

'I believe he MUST like you now,' she cried. 'And if he found that you irremediably belonged to me, he would own it and help you. 'O Stephen, Stephen,' she burst out again, as the remembrance of his packing came afresh to her mind, 'I cannot bear your going away like this! It is too dreadful. All I have been expecting miserably killed within me like this!'

Stephen flushed hot with impulse. 'I will not be a doubt to you--thought of you shall not be a misery to me!' he said. 'We will be wife and husband before we part for long!'

She hid her face on his shoulder. 'Anything to make SURE!' she

whispered.

'I did not like to propose it immediately,' continued Stephen. 'It seemed to me--it seems to me now--like trying to catch you--a girl better in the world than I.'

'Not that, indeed! And am I better in worldly station? What's the use of have beens? We may have been something once; we are nothing now.'

Then they whispered long and earnestly together; Stephen hesitatingly proposing this and that plan, Elfride modifying them, with quick breathings, and hectic flush, and unnaturally bright eyes. It was two o'clock before an arrangement was finally concluded.

She then told him to leave her, giving him his light to go up to his own room. They parted with an agreement not to meet again in the morning. After his door had been some time closed he heard her softly gliding into her chamber.