Chapter XI

'Journeys end in lovers meeting.'

Stephen lay watching the Great Bear; Elfride was regarding a monotonous parallelogram of window blind. Neither slept that night.

Early the next morning--that is to say, four hours after their stolen interview, and just as the earliest servant was heard moving about--Stephen Smith went downstairs, portmanteau in hand. Throughout the night he had intended to see Mr. Swancourt again, but the sharp rebuff of the previous evening rendered such an interview particularly distasteful. Perhaps there was another and less honest reason. He decided to put it off. Whatever of moral timidity or obliquity may have lain in such a decision, no perception of it was strong enough to detain him. He wrote a note in his room, which stated simply that he did not feel happy in the house after Mr. Swancourt's sudden veto on what he had favoured a few hours before; but that he hoped a time would come, and that soon, when his original feelings of pleasure as Mr. Swancourt's guest might be recovered.

He expected to find the downstairs rooms wearing the gray and cheerless aspect that early morning gives to everything out of the sun. He found in the dining room a breakfast laid, of which somebody had just partaken.

Stephen gave the maid-servant his note of adieu. She stated that Mr. Swancourt had risen early that morning, and made an early breakfast. He was not going away that she knew of.

Stephen took a cup of coffee, left the house of his love, and turned into the lane. It was so early that the shaded places still smelt like night time, and the sunny spots had hardly felt the sun. The horizontal rays made every shallow dip in the ground to show as a well-marked hollow. Even the channel of the path was enough to throw shade, and the very stones of the road cast tapering dashes of darkness westward, as long as Jael's tent-nail.

At a spot not more than a hundred yards from the vicar's residence the lane leading thence crossed the high road. Stephen reached the point of intersection, stood still and listened. Nothing could be heard save the lengthy, murmuring line of the sea upon the adjacent shore. He looked at his watch, and then mounted a gate upon which he seated himself, to await the arrival of the carrier. Whilst he sat he heard wheels coming in two directions.

The vehicle approaching on his right he soon recognized as the carrier's. There were the accompanying sounds of the owner's voice and the smack of his whip, distinct in the still morning air, by which he encouraged his horses up the hill.

The other set of wheels sounded from the lane Stephen had just traversed. On closer observation, he perceived that they were moving from the precincts of the ancient manor-house adjoining the vicarage grounds. A carriage then left the entrance gates of the house, and wheeling round came fully in sight. It was a plain travelling carriage, with a small quantity of luggage, apparently a lady's. The vehicle came to the junction of the four ways half-a-minute before the carrier reached the same spot, and crossed directly in his front, proceeding by the lane on the other side.

Inside the carriage Stephen could just discern an elderly lady with a younger woman, who seemed to be her maid. The road they had taken led to Stratleigh, a small watering-place sixteen miles north.

He heard the manor-house gates swing again, and looking up saw another person leaving them, and walking off in the direction of the parsonage. 'Ah, how much I wish I were moving that way!' felt he parenthetically. The gentleman was tall, and resembled Mr. Swancourt in outline and attire. He opened the vicarage gate and went in. Mr. Swancourt, then, it certainly was. Instead of remaining in bed that morning Mr. Swancourt must have taken it into his head to see his new neighbour off on a journey. He must have been greatly interested in that neighbour to do such an unusual thing.

The carrier's conveyance had pulled up, and Stephen now handed in his portmanteau and mounted the shafts. 'Who is that lady in the carriage?'

he inquired indifferently of Lickpan the carrier.

'That, sir, is Mrs. Troyton, a widder wi' a mint o' money. She's the owner of all that part of Endelstow that is not Lord Luxellian's. Only been here a short time; she came into it by law. The owner formerly was a terrible mysterious party--never lived here--hardly ever was seen here except in the month of September, as I might say.'

The horses were started again, and noise rendered further discourse a matter of too great exertion. Stephen crept inside under the tilt, and was soon lost in reverie.

Three hours and a half of straining up hills and jogging down brought them to St. Launce's, the market town and railway station nearest to Endelstow, and the place from which Stephen Smith had journeyed over the downs on the, to him, memorable winter evening at the beginning of the same year. The carrier's van was so timed as to meet a starting up-train, which Stephen entered. Two or three hours' railway travel through vertical cuttings in metamorphic rock, through oak copses rich and green, stretching over slopes and down delightful valleys, glens, and ravines, sparkling with water like many-rilled Ida, and he plunged amid the hundred and fifty thousand people composing the town of Plymouth.

There being some time upon his hands he left his luggage at the cloak-room, and went on foot along Bedford Street to the nearest church.

Here Stephen wandered among the multifarious tombstones and looked in at
the chancel window, dreaming of something that was likely to happen by the altar there in the course of the coming month. He turned away and ascended the Hoe, viewed the magnificent stretch of sea and massive promontories of land, but without particularly discerning one feature of the varied perspective. He still saw that inner prospect--the event he hoped for in yonder church. The wide Sound, the Breakwater, the light-house on far-off Eddystone, the dark steam vessels, brigs, barques, and schooners, either floating stilly, or gliding with tiniest motion, were as the dream, then; the dreamed-of event was as the reality.

Soon Stephen went down from the Hoe, and returned to the railway station. He took his ticket, and entered the London train.

That day was an irksome time at Endelstow vicarage. Neither father nor daughter alluded to the departure of Stephen. Mr. Swancourt's manner towards her partook of the compunctious kindness that arises from a misgiving as to the justice of some previous act.

Either from lack of the capacity to grasp the whole coup d'oeil, or from a natural endowment for certain kinds of stoicism, women are cooler than men in critical situations of the passive form. Probably, in Elfride's case at least, it was blindness to the greater contingencies of the

future she was preparing for herself, which enabled her to ask her father in a quiet voice if he could give her a holiday soon, to ride to St. Launce's and go on to Plymouth.

Now, she had only once before gone alone to Plymouth, and that was in consequence of some unavoidable difficulty. Being a country girl, and a good, not to say a wild, horsewoman, it had been her delight to canter, without the ghost of an attendant, over the fourteen or sixteen miles of hard road intervening between their home and the station at St. Launce's, put up the horse, and go on the remainder of the distance by train, returning in the same manner in the evening. It was then resolved that, though she had successfully accomplished this journey once, it was not to be repeated without some attendance.

But Elfride must not be confounded with ordinary young feminine equestrians. The circumstances of her lonely and narrow life made it imperative that in trotting about the neighbourhood she must trot alone or else not at all. Usage soon rendered this perfectly natural to herself. Her father, who had had other experiences, did not much like the idea of a Swancourt, whose pedigree could be as distinctly traced as a thread in a skein of silk, scampering over the hills like a farmer's daughter, even though he could habitually neglect her. But what with his not being able to afford her a regular attendant, and his inveterate habit of letting anything be to save himself trouble, the circumstance grew customary. And so there arose a chronic notion in the villagers' minds that all ladies rode without an attendant, like Miss Swancourt,

except a few who were sometimes visiting at Lord Luxellian's.

'I don't like your going to Plymouth alone, particularly going to St. Launce's on horseback. Why not drive, and take the man?'

'It is not nice to be so overlooked.' Worm's company would not seriously have interfered with her plans, but it was her humour to go without him.

'When do you want to go?' said her father.

She only answered, 'Soon.'

'I will consider,' he said.

Only a few days elapsed before she asked again. A letter had reached her from Stephen. It had been timed to come on that day by special arrangement between them. In it he named the earliest morning on which he could meet her at Plymouth. Her father had been on a journey to Stratleigh, and returned in unusual buoyancy of spirit. It was a good opportunity; and since the dismissal of Stephen her father had been generally in a mood to make small concessions, that he might steer clear of large ones connected with that outcast lover of hers.

'Next Thursday week I am going from home in a different direction,' said her father. 'In fact, I shall leave home the night before. You might choose the same day, for they wish to take up the carpets, or some such

thing, I think. As I said, I don't like you to be seen in a town on horseback alone; but go if you will.'

Thursday week. Her father had named the very day that Stephen also had named that morning as the earliest on which it would be of any use to meet her; that was, about fifteen days from the day on which he had left Endelstow. Fifteen days--that fragment of duration which has acquired such an interesting individuality from its connection with the English marriage law.

She involuntarily looked at her father so strangely, that on becoming conscious of the look she paled with embarrassment. Her father, too, looked confused. What was he thinking of?

There seemed to be a special facility offered her by a power external to herself in the circumstance that Mr. Swancourt had proposed to leave home the night previous to her wished-for day. Her father seldom took long journeys; seldom slept from home except perhaps on the night following a remote Visitation. Well, she would not inquire too curiously into the reason of the opportunity, nor did he, as would have been natural, proceed to explain it of his own accord. In matters of fact there had hitherto been no reserve between them, though they were not usually confidential in its full sense. But the divergence of their emotions on Stephen's account had produced an estrangement which just at present went even to the extent of reticence on the most ordinary household topics.

Elfride was almost unconsciously relieved, persuading herself that her father's reserve on his business justified her in secrecy as regarded her own--a secrecy which was necessarily a foregone decision with her. So anxious is a young conscience to discover a palliative, that the ex post facto nature of a reason is of no account in excluding it.

The intervening fortnight was spent by her mostly in walking by herself among the shrubs and trees, indulging sometimes in sanguine anticipations; more, far more frequently, in misgivings. All her flowers seemed dull of hue; her pets seemed to look wistfully into her eyes, as if they no longer stood in the same friendly relation to her as formerly. She wore melancholy jewellery, gazed at sunsets, and talked to old men and women. It was the first time that she had had an inner and private world apart from the visible one about her. She wished that her father, instead of neglecting her even more than usual, would make some advance--just one word; she would then tell all, and risk Stephen's displeasure. Thus brought round to the youth again, she saw him in her fancy, standing, touching her, his eyes full of sad affection, hopelessly renouncing his attempt because she had renounced hers; and she could not recede.

On the Wednesday she was to receive another letter. She had resolved to let her father see the arrival of this one, be the consequences what they might: the dread of losing her lover by this deed of honesty prevented her acting upon the resolve. Five minutes before the postman's

expected arrival she slipped out, and down the lane to meet him. She met him immediately upon turning a sharp angle, which hid her from view in the direction of the vicarage. The man smilingly handed one missive, and was going on to hand another, a circular from some tradesman.

'No,' she said; 'take that on to the house.'

'Why, miss, you are doing what your father has done for the last fortnight.'

She did not comprehend.

'Why, come to this corner, and take a letter of me every morning, all writ in the same handwriting, and letting any others for him go on to the house.' And on the postman went.

No sooner had he turned the corner behind her back than she heard her father meet and address the man. She had saved her letter by two minutes. Her father audibly went through precisely the same performance as she had just been guilty of herself.

This stealthy conduct of his was, to say the least, peculiar.

Given an impulsive inconsequent girl, neglected as to her inner life by her only parent, and the following forces alive within her; to determine

a resultant:

First love acted upon by a deadly fear of separation from its object: inexperience, guiding onward a frantic wish to prevent the above-named issue: misgivings as to propriety, met by hope of ultimate exoneration: indignation at parental inconsistency in first encouraging, then forbidding: a chilling sense of disobedience, overpowered by a conscientious inability to brook a breaking of plighted faith with a man who, in essentials, had remained unaltered from the beginning: a blessed hope that opposition would turn an erroneous judgement: a bright faith that things would mend thereby, and wind up well.

Probably the result would, after all, have been nil, had not the following few remarks been made one day at breakfast.

Her father was in his old hearty spirits. He smiled to himself at stories too bad to tell, and called Elfride a little scamp for surreptitiously preserving some blind kittens that ought to have been drowned. After this expression, she said to him suddenly:

'If Mr. Smith had been already in the family, you would not have been made wretched by discovering he had poor relations?'

'Do you mean in the family by marriage?' he replied inattentively, and continuing to peel his egg.

The accumulating scarlet told that was her meaning, as much as the affirmative reply.

'I should have put up with it, no doubt,' Mr. Swancourt observed.

'So that you would not have been driven into hopeless melancholy, but have made the best of him?'

Elfride's erratic mind had from her youth upwards been constantly in the habit of perplexing her father by hypothetical questions, based on absurd conditions. The present seemed to be cast so precisely in the mould of previous ones that, not being given to syntheses of circumstances, he answered it with customary complacency.

'If he were allied to us irretrievably, of course I, or any sensible man, should accept conditions that could not be altered; certainly not be hopelessly melancholy about it. I don't believe anything in the world would make me hopelessly melancholy. And don't let anything make you so, either.'

'I won't, papa,' she cried, with a serene brightness that pleased him.

Certainly Mr. Swancourt must have been far from thinking that the brightness came from an exhilarating intention to hold back no longer from the mad action she had planned.

In the evening he drove away towards Stratleigh, quite alone. It was an unusual course for him. At the door Elfride had been again almost impelled by her feelings to pour out all.

'Why are you going to Stratleigh, papa?' she said, and looked at him longingly.

'I will tell you to-morrow when I come back,' he said cheerily; 'not before then, Elfride. Thou wilt not utter what thou dost not know, and so far will I trust thee, gentle Elfride.'

She was repressed and hurt.

'I will tell you my errand to Plymouth, too, when I come back,' she murmured.

He went away. His jocularity made her intention seem the lighter, as his indifference made her more resolved to do as she liked.

It was a familiar September sunset, dark-blue fragments of cloud upon an orange-yellow sky. These sunsets used to tempt her to walk towards them, as any beautiful thing tempts a near approach. She went through the field to the privet hedge, clambered into the middle of it, and reclined upon the thick boughs. After looking westward for a considerable time, she blamed herself for not looking eastward to where Stephen was, and turned round. Ultimately her eyes fell upon the ground.

A peculiarity was observable beneath her. A green field spread itself on each side of the hedge, one belonging to the glebe, the other being a part of the land attached to the manor-house adjoining. On the vicarage side she saw a little footpath, the distinctive and altogether exceptional feature of which consisted in its being only about ten yards long; it terminated abruptly at each end.

A footpath, suddenly beginning and suddenly ending, coming from nowhere and leading nowhere, she had never seen before.

Yes, she had, on second thoughts. She had seen exactly such a path trodden in the front of barracks by the sentry.

And this recollection explained the origin of the path here. Her father had trodden it by pacing up and down, as she had once seen him doing.

Sitting on the hedge as she sat now, her eyes commanded a view of both sides of it. And a few minutes later, Elfride looked over to the manor side.

Here was another sentry path. It was like the first in length, and it began and ended exactly opposite the beginning and ending of its neighbour, but it was thinner, and less distinct.

Two reasons existed for the difference. This one might have been trodden

by a similar weight of tread to the other, exercised a less number of times; or it might have been walked just as frequently, but by lighter feet.

Probably a gentleman from Scotland-yard, had he been passing at the time, might have considered the latter alternative as the more probable. Elfride thought otherwise, so far as she thought at all. But her own great To-Morrow was now imminent; all thoughts inspired by casual sights of the eye were only allowed to exercise themselves in inferior corners of her brain, previously to being banished altogether.

Elfride was at length compelled to reason practically upon her undertaking. All her definite perceptions thereon, when the emotion accompanying them was abstracted, amounted to no more than these:

'Say an hour and three-quarters to ride to St. Launce's.

'Say half an hour at the Falcon to change my dress.

'Say two hours waiting for some train and getting to Plymouth.

'Say an hour to spare before twelve o'clock.

'Total time from leaving Endelstow till twelve o'clock, five hours.

'Therefore I shall have to start at seven.'

No surprise or sense of unwontedness entered the minds of the servants at her early ride. The monotony of life we associate with people of small incomes in districts out of the sound of the railway whistle, has one exception, which puts into shade the experience of dwellers about the great centres of population--that is, in travelling. Every journey there is more or less an adventure; adventurous hours are necessarily chosen for the most commonplace outing. Miss Elfride had to leave early--that was all.

Elfride never went out on horseback but she brought home something--something found, or something bought. If she trotted to town or village, her burden was books. If to hills, woods, or the seashore, it was wonderful mosses, abnormal twigs, a handkerchief of wet shells or seaweed.

Once, in muddy weather, when Pansy was walking with her down the street of Castle Boterel, on a fair-day, a packet in front of her and a packet under her arm, an accident befell the packets, and they slipped down. On one side of her, three volumes of fiction lay kissing the mud; on the other numerous skeins of polychromatic wools lay absorbing it. Unpleasant women smiled through windows at the mishap, the men all looked round, and a boy, who was minding a ginger-bread stall whilst the owner had gone to get drunk, laughed loudly. The blue eyes turned to sapphires, and the cheeks crimsoned with vexation.

After that misadventure she set her wits to work, and was ingenious enough to invent an arrangement of small straps about the saddle, by which a great deal could be safely carried thereon, in a small compass. Here she now spread out and fastened a plain dark walking-dress and a few other trifles of apparel. Worm opened the gate for her, and she vanished away.

One of the brightest mornings of late summer shone upon her. The heather was at its purplest, the furze at its yellowest, the grasshoppers chirped loud enough for birds, the snakes hissed like little engines, and Elfride at first felt lively. Sitting at ease upon Pansy, in her orthodox riding-habit and nondescript hat, she looked what she felt. But the mercury of those days had a trick of falling unexpectedly. First, only for one minute in ten had she a sense of depression. Then a large cloud, that had been hanging in the north like a black fleece, came and placed itself between her and the sun. It helped on what was already inevitable, and she sank into a uniformity of sadness.

She turned in the saddle and looked back. They were now on an open table-land, whose altitude still gave her a view of the sea by Endelstow. She looked longingly at that spot.

During this little revulsion of feeling Pansy had been still advancing, and Elfride felt it would be absurd to turn her little mare's head the other way. 'Still,' she thought, 'if I had a mamma at home I WOULD go

back!'

And making one of those stealthy movements by which women let their hearts juggle with their brains, she did put the horse's head about, as if unconsciously, and went at a hand-gallop towards home for more than a mile. By this time, from the inveterate habit of valuing what we have renounced directly the alternative is chosen, the thought of her forsaken Stephen recalled her, and she turned about, and cantered on to St. Launce's again.

This miserable strife of thought now began to rage in all its wildness. Overwrought and trembling, she dropped the rein upon Pansy's shoulders, and vowed she would be led whither the horse would take her.

Pansy slackened her pace to a walk, and walked on with her agitated burden for three or four minutes. At the expiration of this time they had come to a little by-way on the right, leading down a slope to a pool of water. The pony stopped, looked towards the pool, and then advanced and stooped to drink.

Elfride looked at her watch and discovered that if she were going to reach St. Launce's early enough to change her dress at the Falcon, and get a chance of some early train to Plymouth--there were only two available--it was necessary to proceed at once.

She was impatient. It seemed as if Pansy would never stop drinking; and

the repose of the pool, the idle motions of the insects and flies upon it, the placid waving of the flags, the leaf-skeletons, like Genoese filigree, placidly sleeping at the bottom, by their contrast with her own turmoil made her impatience greater.

Pansy did turn at last, and went up the slope again to the high-road. The pony came upon it, and stood cross-wise, looking up and down. Elfride's heart throbbed erratically, and she thought, 'Horses, if left to themselves, make for where they are best fed. Pansy will go home.'

Pansy turned and walked on towards St. Launce's

Pansy at home, during summer, had little but grass to live on. After a run to St. Launce's she always had a feed of corn to support her on the return journey. Therefore, being now more than half way, she preferred St. Launce's.

But Elfride did not remember this now. All she cared to recognize was a dreamy fancy that to-day's rash action was not her own. She was disabled by her moods, and it seemed indispensable to adhere to the programme. So strangely involved are motives that, more than by her promise to Stephen, more even than by her love, she was forced on by a sense of the necessity of keeping faith with herself, as promised in the inane vow of ten minutes ago.

She hesitated no longer. Pansy went, like the steed of Adonis, as if

she told the steps. Presently the quaint gables and jumbled roofs of St. Launce's were spread beneath her, and going down the hill she entered the courtyard of the Falcon. Mrs. Buckle, the landlady, came to the door to meet her.

The Swancourts were well known here. The transition from equestrian to the ordinary guise of railway travellers had been more than once performed by father and daughter in this establishment.

In less than a quarter of an hour Elfride emerged from the door in her walking dress, and went to the railway. She had not told Mrs. Buckle anything as to her intentions, and was supposed to have gone out shopping.

An hour and forty minutes later, and she was in Stephen's arms at the Plymouth station. Not upon the platform--in the secret retreat of a deserted waiting-room.

Stephen's face boded ill. He was pale and despondent.

'What is the matter?' she asked.

'We cannot be married here to-day, my Elfie! I ought to have known it and stayed here. In my ignorance I did not. I have the licence, but it can only be used in my parish in London. I only came down last night, as you know.'

'What shall we do?' she said blankly.

'There's only one thing we can do, darling.'

'What's that?'

'Go on to London by a train just starting, and be married there to-morrow.'

'Passengers for the 11.5 up-train take their seats!' said a guard's voice on the platform.

'Will you go, Elfride?'

'I will.'

In three minutes the train had moved off, bearing away with it Stephen and Elfride.