Chapter XII

'Adieu! she cries, and waved her lily hand.'

The few tattered clouds of the morning enlarged and united, the sun withdrew behind them to emerge no more that day, and the evening drew to a close in drifts of rain. The water-drops beat like duck shot against the window of the railway-carriage containing Stephen and Elfride.

The journey from Plymouth to Paddington, by even the most headlong express, allows quite enough leisure for passion of any sort to cool. Elfride's excitement had passed off, and she sat in a kind of stupor during the latter half of the journey. She was aroused by the clanging of the maze of rails over which they traced their way at the entrance to the station.

Is this London?' she said.

'Yes, darling,' said Stephen in a tone of assurance he was far from feeling. To him, no less than to her, the reality so greatly differed from the prefiguring.

She peered out as well as the window, beaded with drops, would allow her, and saw only the lamps, which had just been lit, blinking in the wet atmosphere, and rows of hideous zinc chimney-pipes in dim relief

against the sky. She writhed uneasily, as when a thought is swelling in the mind which must cause much pain at its deliverance in words. Elfride had known no more about the stings of evil report than the native wild-fowl knew of the effects of Crusoe's first shot. Now she saw a little further, and a little further still.

The train stopped. Stephen relinquished the soft hand he had held all the day, and proceeded to assist her on to the platform.

This act of alighting upon strange ground seemed all that was wanted to complete a resolution within her.

She looked at her betrothed with despairing eyes.

'O Stephen,' she exclaimed, 'I am so miserable! I must go home again--I must--I must! Forgive my wretched vacillation. I don't like it here--nor myself--nor you!'

Stephen looked bewildered, and did not speak.

'Will you allow me to go home?' she implored. 'I won't trouble you to go with me. I will not be any weight upon you; only say you will agree to my returning; that you will not hate me for it, Stephen! It is better that I should return again; indeed it is, Stephen.'

'But we can't return now,' he said in a deprecatory tone.

'I must! I will!'

'How? When do you want to go?'

'Now. Can we go at once?'

The lad looked hopelessly along the platform.

'If you must go, and think it wrong to remain, dearest,' said he sadly, 'you shall. You shall do whatever you like, my Elfride. But would you in reality rather go now than stay till to-morrow, and go as my wife?'

'Yes, yes--much--anything to go now. I must; I must!' she cried.

'We ought to have done one of two things,' he answered gloomily. 'Never to have started, or not to have returned without being married. I don't like to say it, Elfride--indeed I don't; but you must be told this, that going back unmarried may compromise your good name in the eyes of people who may hear of it.'

'They will not; and I must go.'

'O Elfride! I am to blame for bringing you away.'

'Not at all. I am the elder.'

'By a month; and what's that? But never mind that now.' He looked around. 'Is there a train for Plymouth to-night?' he inquired of a guard. The guard passed on and did not speak.

'Is there a train for Plymouth to-night?' said Elfride to another.

'Yes, miss; the 8.10--leaves in ten minutes. You have come to the wrong platform; it is the other side. Change at Bristol into the night mail. Down that staircase, and under the line.'

They ran down the staircase--Elfride first--to the booking-office, and into a carriage with an official standing beside the door. 'Show your tickets, please.' They are locked in--men about the platform accelerate their velocities till they fly up and down like shuttles in a loom--a whistle--the waving of a flag--a human cry--a steam groan--and away they go to Plymouth again, just catching these words as they glide off:

'Those two youngsters had a near run for it, and no mistake!'

Elfride found her breath.

'And have you come too, Stephen? Why did you?'

'I shall not leave you till I see you safe at St. Launce's. Do not think

worse of me than I am, Elfride.'

And then they rattled along through the night, back again by the way they had come. The weather cleared, and the stars shone in upon them. Their two or three fellow-passengers sat for most of the time with closed eyes. Stephen sometimes slept; Elfride alone was wakeful and palpitating hour after hour.

The day began to break, and revealed that they were by the sea. Red rocks overhung them, and, receding into distance, grew livid in the blue grey atmosphere. The sun rose, and sent penetrating shafts of light in upon their weary faces. Another hour, and the world began to be busy. They waited yet a little, and the train slackened its speed in view of the platform at St. Launce's.

She shivered, and mused sadly.

'I did not see all the consequences,' she said. 'Appearances are wofully against me. If anybody finds me out, I am, I suppose, disgraced.'

'Then appearances will speak falsely; and how can that matter, even if they do? I shall be your husband sooner or later, for certain, and so prove your purity.'

'Stephen, once in London I ought to have married you,' she said firmly. 'It was my only safe defence. I see more things now than I did

yesterday. My only remaining chance is not to be discovered; and that we must fight for most desperately.'

They stepped out. Elfride pulled a thick veil over her face.

A woman with red and scaly eyelids and glistening eyes was sitting on a bench just inside the office-door. She fixed her eyes upon Elfride with an expression whose force it was impossible to doubt, but the meaning of which was not clear; then upon the carriage they had left. She seemed to read a sinister story in the scene.

Elfride shrank back, and turned the other way.

'Who is that woman?' said Stephen. 'She looked hard at you.'

'Mrs. Jethway--a widow, and mother of that young man whose tomb we sat on the other night. Stephen, she is my enemy. Would that God had had mercy enough upon me to have hidden this from HER!'

'Do not talk so hopelessly,' he remonstrated. 'I don't think she recognized us.'

'I pray that she did not.'

He put on a more vigorous mood.

'Now, we will go and get some breakfast.'

'No, no!' she begged. 'I cannot eat. I MUST get back to Endelstow.'

Elfride was as if she had grown years older than Stephen now.

'But you have had nothing since last night but that cup of tea at Bristol.'

'I can't eat, Stephen.'

'Wine and biscuit?'

'No.'

'Nor tea, nor coffee?'

'No.'

'A glass of water?'

'No. I want something that makes people strong and energetic for the present, that borrows the strength of to-morrow for use to-day--leaving to-morrow without any at all for that matter; or even that would take all life away to-morrow, so long as it enabled me to get home again now. Brandy, that's what I want. That woman's eyes have eaten my heart away!'

'You are wild; and you grieve me, darling. Must it be brandy?'

'Yes, if you please.'

'How much?'

'I don't know. I have never drunk more than a teaspoonful at once. All I know is that I want it. Don't get it at the Falcon.'

He left her in the fields, and went to the nearest inn in that direction. Presently he returned with a small flask nearly full, and some slices of bread-and-butter, thin as wafers, in a paper-bag. Elfride took a sip or two.

'It goes into my eyes,' she said wearily. 'I can't take any more. Yes, I will; I will close my eyes. Ah, it goes to them by an inside route. I don't want it; throw it away.'

However, she could eat, and did eat. Her chief attention was concentrated upon how to get the horse from the Falcon stables without suspicion. Stephen was not allowed to accompany her into the town. She acted now upon conclusions reached without any aid from him: his power over her seemed to have departed.

'You had better not be seen with me, even here where I am so little

known. We have begun stealthily as thieves, and we must end stealthily as thieves, at all hazards. Until papa has been told by me myself, a discovery would be terrible.'

Walking and gloomily talking thus they waited till nearly nine o'clock, at which time Elfride thought she might call at the Falcon without creating much surprise. Behind the railway-station was the river, spanned by an old Tudor bridge, whence the road diverged in two directions, one skirting the suburbs of the town, and winding round again into the high-road to Endelstow. Beside this road Stephen sat, and awaited her return from the Falcon.

He sat as one sitting for a portrait, motionless, watching the chequered lights and shades on the tree-trunks, the children playing opposite the school previous to entering for the morning lesson, the reapers in a field afar off. The certainty of possession had not come, and there was nothing to mitigate the youth's gloom, that increased with the thought of the parting now so near.

At length she came trotting round to him, in appearance much as on the romantic morning of their visit to the cliff, but shorn of the radiance which glistened about her then. However, her comparative immunity from further risk and trouble had considerably composed her. Elfride's capacity for being wounded was only surpassed by her capacity for healing, which rightly or wrongly is by some considered an index of transientness of feeling in general.

'Elfride, what did they say at the Falcon?'

'Nothing. Nobody seemed curious about me. They knew I went to Plymouth, and I have stayed there a night now and then with Miss Bicknell. I rather calculated upon that.'

And now parting arose like a death to these children, for it was imperative that she should start at once. Stephen walked beside her for nearly a mile. During the walk he said sadly:

'Elfride, four-and-twenty hours have passed, and the thing is not done.'

'But you have insured that it shall be done.'

'How have I?'

'O Stephen, you ask how! Do you think I could marry another man on earth after having gone thus far with you? Have I not shown beyond possibility of doubt that I can be nobody else's? Have I not irretrievably committed myself?--pride has stood for nothing in the face of my great love. You misunderstood my turning back, and I cannot explain it. It was wrong to go with you at all; and though it would have been worse to go further, it would have been better policy, perhaps. Be assured of this, that whenever you have a home for me--however poor and humble--and come and

claim me, I am ready.' She added bitterly, 'When my father knows of this day's work, he may be only too glad to let me go.'

'Perhaps he may, then, insist upon our marriage at once!' Stephen answered, seeing a ray of hope in the very focus of her remorse. 'I hope he may, even if we had still to part till I am ready for you, as we intended.'

Elfride did not reply.

'You don't seem the same woman, Elfie, that you were yesterday.'

'Nor am I. But good-bye. Go back now.' And she reined the horse for parting. 'O Stephen,' she cried, 'I feel so weak! I don't know how to meet him. Cannot you, after all, come back with me?'

'Shall I come?'

Elfride paused to think.

'No; it will not do. It is my utter foolishness that makes me say such words. But he will send for you.'

'Say to him,' continued Stephen, 'that we did this in the absolute despair of our minds. Tell him we don't wish him to favour us--only to deal justly with us. If he says, marry now, so much the better. If not,

say that all may be put right by his promise to allow me to have you when I am good enough for you--which may be soon. Say I have nothing to offer him in exchange for his treasure--the more sorry I; but all the love, and all the life, and all the labour of an honest man shall be yours. As to when this had better be told, I leave you to judge.'

His words made her cheerful enough to toy with her position.

'And if ill report should come, Stephen,' she said smiling, 'why, the orange-tree must save me, as it saved virgins in St. George's time from the poisonous breath of the dragon. There, forgive me for forwardness: I am going.'

Then the boy and girl beguiled themselves with words of half-parting only.

'Own wifie, God bless you till we meet again!'

'Till we meet again, good-bye!'

And the pony went on, and she spoke to him no more. He saw her figure diminish and her blue veil grow gray--saw it with the agonizing sensations of a slow death.

After thus parting from a man than whom she had known none greater as yet, Elfride rode rapidly onwards, a tear being occasionally shaken

from her eyes into the road. What yesterday had seemed so desirable, so promising, even trifling, had now acquired the complexion of a tragedy.

She saw the rocks and sea in the neighbourhood of Endelstow, and heaved a sigh of relief.

When she passed a field behind the vicarage she heard the voices of Unity and William Worm. They were hanging a carpet upon a line. Unity was uttering a sentence that concluded with 'when Miss Elfride comes.'

'When d'ye expect her?'

'Not till evening now. She's safe enough at Miss Bicknell's, bless ye.'

Elfride went round to the door. She did not knock or ring; and seeing nobody to take the horse, Elfride led her round to the yard, slipped off the bridle and saddle, drove her towards the paddock, and turned her in. Then Elfride crept indoors, and looked into all the ground-floor rooms. Her father was not there.

On the mantelpiece of the drawing-room stood a letter addressed to her in his handwriting. She took it and read it as she went upstairs to change her habit.

STRATLEIGH, Thursday.

'DEAR ELFRIDE,--On second thoughts I will not return to-day, but only come as far as Wadcombe. I shall be at home by to-morrow afternoon, and bring a friend with me.--Yours, in haste,

C. S.'

After making a quick toilet she felt more revived, though still suffering from a headache. On going out of the door she met Unity at the top of the stair.

'O Miss Elfride! I said to myself 'tis her sperrit! We didn't dream o' you not coming home last night. You didn't say anything about staying.'

'I intended to come home the same evening, but altered my plan. I wished I hadn't afterwards. Papa will be angry, I suppose?'

'Better not tell him, miss,' said Unity.

'I do fear to,' she murmured. 'Unity, would you just begin telling him when he comes home?'

'What! and get you into trouble?'

'I deserve it.'

'No, indeed, I won't,' said Unity. 'It is not such a mighty matter, Miss Elfride. I says to myself, master's taking a hollerday, and because he's not been kind lately to Miss Elfride, she----'

'Is imitating him. Well, do as you like. And will you now bring me some luncheon?'

After satisfying an appetite which the fresh marine air had given her in its victory over an agitated mind, she put on her hat and went to the garden and summer-house. She sat down, and leant with her head in a corner. Here she fell asleep.

Half-awake, she hurriedly looked at the time. She had been there three hours. At the same moment she heard the outer gate swing together, and wheels sweep round the entrance; some prior noise from the same source having probably been the cause of her awaking. Next her father's voice was heard calling to Worm.

Elfride passed along a walk towards the house behind a belt of shrubs. She heard a tongue holding converse with her father, which was not that of either of the servants. Her father and the stranger were laughing together. Then there was a rustling of silk, and Mr. Swancourt and his companion, or companions, to all seeming entered the door of the house, for nothing more of them was audible. Elfride had turned back to meditate on what friends these could be, when she heard footsteps, and

her father exclaiming behind her:

'O Elfride, here you are! I hope you got on well?'

Elfride's heart smote her, and she did not speak.

'Come back to the summer-house a minute,' continued Mr. Swancourt; 'I have to tell you of that I promised to.'

They entered the summer-house, and stood leaning over the knotty woodwork of the balustrade.

'Now,' said her father radiantly, 'guess what I have to say.' He seemed to be regarding his own existence so intently, that he took no interest in nor even saw the complexion of hers.

'I cannot, papa,' she said sadly.

'Try, dear.'

'I would rather not, indeed.'

'You are tired. You look worn. The ride was too much for you. Well, this is what I went away for. I went to be married!'

'Married!' she faltered, and could hardly check an involuntary 'So did

I.' A moment after and her resolve to confess perished like a bubble.

'Yes; to whom do you think? Mrs. Troyton, the new owner of the estate over the hedge, and of the old manor-house. It was only finally settled between us when I went to Stratleigh a few days ago.' He lowered his voice to a sly tone of merriment. 'Now, as to your stepmother, you'll find she is not much to look at, though a good deal to listen to. She is twenty years older than myself, for one thing.'

'You forget that I know her. She called here once, after we had been, and found her away from home.'

'Of course, of course. Well, whatever her looks are, she's as excellent a woman as ever breathed. She has had lately left her as absolute property three thousand five hundred a year, besides the devise of this estate--and, by the way, a large legacy came to her in satisfaction of dower, as it is called.'

'Three thousand five hundred a year!'

'And a large--well, a fair-sized--mansion in town, and a pedigree as long as my walking-stick; though that bears evidence of being rather a raked-up affair--done since the family got rich--people do those things now as they build ruins on maiden estates and cast antiques at Birmingham.'

Elfride merely listened and said nothing.

He continued more quietly and impressively. 'Yes, Elfride, she is wealthy in comparison with us, though with few connections. However, she will introduce you to the world a little. We are going to exchange her house in Baker Street for one at Kensington, for your sake. Everybody is going there now, she says. At Easters we shall fly to town for the usual three months--I shall have a curate of course by that time. Elfride, I am past love, you know, and I honestly confess that I married her for your sake. Why a woman of her standing should have thrown herself away upon me, God knows. But I suppose her age and plainness were too pronounced for a town man. With your good looks, if you now play your cards well, you may marry anybody. Of course, a little contrivance will be necessary; but there's nothing to stand between you and a husband with a title, that I can see. Lady Luxellian was only a squire's daughter. Now, don't you see how foolish the old fancy was? But come, she is indoors waiting to see you. It is as good as a play, too,' continued the vicar, as they walked towards the house. 'I courted her through the privet hedge yonder: not entirely, you know, but we used to walk there of an evening--nearly every evening at last. But I needn't tell you details now; everything was terribly matter-of-fact, I assure you. At last, that day I saw her at Stratleigh, we determined to settle it off-hand.'

'And you never said a word to me,' replied Elfride, not reproachfully either in tone or thought. Indeed, her feeling was the very reverse of

reproachful. She felt relieved and even thankful. Where confidence had not been given, how could confidence be expected?

Her father mistook her dispassionateness for a veil of politeness over a sense of ill-usage. 'I am not altogether to blame,' he said. 'There were two or three reasons for secrecy. One was the recent death of her relative the testator, though that did not apply to you. But remember, Elfride,' he continued in a stiffer tone, 'you had mixed yourself up so foolishly with those low people, the Smiths--and it was just, too, when Mrs. Troyton and myself were beginning to understand each other--that I resolved to say nothing even to you. How did I know how far you had gone with them and their son? You might have made a point of taking tea with them every day, for all that I knew.'

Elfride swallowed her feelings as she best could, and languidly though flatly asked a question.

'Did you kiss Mrs. Troyton on the lawn about three weeks ago? That evening I came into the study and found you had just had candles in?'

Mr. Swancourt looked rather red and abashed, as middle-aged lovers are apt to do when caught in the tricks of younger ones.

'Well, yes; I think I did,' he stammered; 'just to please her, you know.' And then recovering himself he laughed heartily.

'And was this what your Horatian quotation referred to?'

'It was, Elfride.'

They stepped into the drawing-room from the verandah. At that moment Mrs. Swancourt came downstairs, and entered the same room by the door.

'Here, Charlotte, is my little Elfride,' said Mr. Swancourt, with the increased affection of tone often adopted towards relations when newly produced.

Poor Elfride, not knowing what to do, did nothing at all; but stood receptive of all that came to her by sight, hearing, and touch.

Mrs. Swancourt moved forward, took her step-daughter's hand, then kissed her.

'Ah, darling!' she exclaimed good-humouredly, 'you didn't think when you showed a strange old woman over the conservatory a month or two ago, and explained the flowers to her so prettily, that she would so soon be here in new colours. Nor did she, I am sure.'

The new mother had been truthfully enough described by Mr. Swancourt. She was not physically attractive. She was dark--very dark--in complexion, portly in figure, and with a plentiful residuum of hair in the proportion of half a dozen white ones to half a dozen black ones,

though the latter were black indeed. No further observed, she was not a woman to like. But there was more to see. To the most superficial critic it was apparent that she made no attempt to disguise her age. She looked sixty at the first glance, and close acquaintanceship never proved her older.

Another and still more winning trait was one attaching to the corners of her mouth. Before she made a remark these often twitched gently: not backwards and forwards, the index of nervousness; not down upon the jaw, the sign of determination; but palpably upwards, in precisely the curve adopted to represent mirth in the broad caricatures of schoolboys. Only this element in her face was expressive of anything within the woman, but it was unmistakable. It expressed humour subjective as well as objective--which could survey the peculiarities of self in as whimsical a light as those of other people.

This is not all of Mrs. Swancourt. She had held out to Elfride hands whose fingers were literally stiff with rings, signis auroque rigentes, like Helen's robe. These rows of rings were not worn in vanity apparently. They were mostly antique and dull, though a few were the reverse.

RIGHT HAND.

1st. Plainly set oval onyx, representing a devil's head. 2nd. Green

jasper intaglio, with red veins. 3rd. Entirely gold, bearing figure of a hideous griffin. 4th. A sea-green monster diamond, with small diamonds round it. 5th. Antique cornelian intaglio of dancing figure of a satyr. 6th. An angular band chased with dragons' heads. 7th. A facetted carbuncle accompanied by ten little twinkling emeralds; &c. &c.

LEFT HAND.

1st. A reddish-yellow toadstone. 2nd. A heavy ring enamelled in colours, and bearing a jacynth. 3rd. An amethystine sapphire. 4th. A polished ruby, surrounded by diamonds. 5th. The engraved ring of an abbess. 6th. A gloomy intaglio; &c. &c.

Beyond this rather quaint array of stone and metal Mrs. Swancourt wore no ornament whatever.

Elfride had been favourably impressed with Mrs. Troyton at their meeting about two months earlier; but to be pleased with a woman as a momentary acquaintance was different from being taken with her as a stepmother. However, the suspension of feeling was but for a moment. Elfride decided to like her still.

Mrs. Swancourt was a woman of the world as to knowledge, the reverse as to action, as her marriage suggested. Elfride and the lady were soon

inextricably involved in conversation, and Mr. Swancourt left them to themselves.

'And what do you find to do with yourself here?' Mrs. Swancourt said, after a few remarks about the wedding. 'You ride, I know.'

'Yes, I ride. But not much, because papa doesn't like my going alone.'

'You must have somebody to look after you.'

'And I read, and write a little.'

'You should write a novel. The regular resource of people who don't go enough into the world to live a novel is to write one.'

'I have done it,' said Elfride, looking dubiously at Mrs. Swancourt, as if in doubt whether she would meet with ridicule there.

'That's right. Now, then, what is it about, dear?'

'About--well, it is a romance of the Middle Ages.'

'Knowing nothing of the present age, which everybody knows about, for safety you chose an age known neither to you nor other people. That's it, eh? No, no; I don't mean it, dear.'

'Well, I have had some opportunities of studying mediaeval art and manners in the library and private museum at Endelstow House, and I thought I should like to try my hand upon a fiction. I know the time for these tales is past; but I was interested in it, very much interested.'

'When is it to appear?'

'Oh, never, I suppose.'

'Nonsense, my dear girl. Publish it, by all means. All ladies do that sort of thing now; not for profit, you know, but as a guarantee of mental respectability to their future husbands.'

'An excellent idea of us ladies.'

'Though I am afraid it rather resembles the melancholy ruse of throwing loaves over castle-walls at besiegers, and suggests desperation rather than plenty inside.'

'Did you ever try it?'

'No; I was too far gone even for that.'

'Papa says no publisher will take my book.'

'That remains to be proved. I'll give my word, my dear, that by this

time next year it shall be printed.'

'Will you, indeed?' said Elfride, partially brightening with pleasure, though she was sad enough in her depths. 'I thought brains were the indispensable, even if the only, qualification for admission to the republic of letters. A mere commonplace creature like me will soon be turned out again.'

'Oh no; once you are there you'll be like a drop of water in a piece of rock-crystal--your medium will dignify your commonness.'

'It will be a great satisfaction,' Elfride murmured, and thought of Stephen, and wished she could make a great fortune by writing romances, and marry him and live happily.

'And then we'll go to London, and then to Paris,' said Mrs. Swancourt. 'I have been talking to your father about it. But we have first to move into the manor-house, and we think of staying at Torquay whilst that is going on. Meanwhile, instead of going on a honeymoon scamper by ourselves, we have come home to fetch you, and go all together to Bath for two or three weeks.'

Elfride assented pleasantly, even gladly; but she saw that, by this marriage, her father and herself had ceased for ever to be the close relations they had been up to a few weeks ago. It was impossible now to tell him the tale of her wild elopement with Stephen Smith.

He was still snugly housed in her heart. His absence had regained for him much of that aureola of saintship which had been nearly abstracted during her reproachful mood on that miserable journey from London. Rapture is often cooled by contact with its cause, especially if under awkward conditions. And that last experience with Stephen had done anything but make him shine in her eyes. His very kindness in letting her return was his offence. Elfride had her sex's love of sheer force in a man, however ill-directed; and at that critical juncture in London Stephen's only chance of retaining the ascendancy over her that his face and not his parts had acquired for him, would have been by doing what, for one thing, he was too youthful to undertake--that was, dragging her by the wrist to the rails of some altar, and peremptorily marrying her. Decisive action is seen by appreciative minds to be frequently objectless, and sometimes fatal; but decision, however suicidal, has more charm for a woman than the most unequivocal Fabian success.

However, some of the unpleasant accessories of that occasion were now out of sight again, and Stephen had resumed not a few of his fancy colours.