

Chapter XIII

'He set in order many proverbs.'

It is London in October--two months further on in the story.

Bede's Inn has this peculiarity, that it faces, receives from, and discharges into a bustling thoroughfare speaking only of wealth and respectability, whilst its postern abuts on as crowded and poverty-stricken a network of alleys as are to be found anywhere in the metropolis. The moral consequences are, first, that those who occupy chambers in the Inn may see a great deal of shirtless humanity's habits and enjoyments without doing more than look down from a back window; and second they may hear wholesome though unpleasant social reminders through the medium of a harsh voice, an unequal footstep, the echo of a blow or a fall, which originates in the person of some drunkard or wife-beater, as he crosses and interferes with the quiet of the square. Characters of this kind frequently pass through the Inn from a little foxhole of an alley at the back, but they never loiter there.

It is hardly necessary to state that all the sights and movements proper to the Inn are most orderly. On the fine October evening on which we follow Stephen Smith to this place, a placid porter is sitting on a stool under a sycamore-tree in the midst, with a little cane in his hand. We notice the thick coat of soot upon the branches, hanging

underneath them in flakes, as in a chimney. The blackness of these boughs does not at present improve the tree--nearly forsaken by its leaves as it is--but in the spring their green fresh beauty is made doubly beautiful by the contrast. Within the railings is a flower-garden of respectable dahlias and chrysanthemums, where a man is sweeping the leaves from the grass.

Stephen selects a doorway, and ascends an old though wide wooden staircase, with moulded balusters and handrail, which in a country manor-house would be considered a noteworthy specimen of Renaissance workmanship. He reaches a door on the first floor, over which is painted, in black letters, 'Mr. Henry Knight'--'Barrister-at-law' being understood but not expressed. The wall is thick, and there is a door at its outer and inner face. The outer one happens to be ajar: Stephen goes to the other, and taps.

'Come in!' from distant penetralia.

First was a small anteroom, divided from the inner apartment by a wainscoted archway two or three yards wide. Across this archway hung a pair of dark-green curtains, making a mystery of all within the arch except the spasmodic scratching of a quill pen. Here was grouped a chaotic assemblage of articles--mainly old framed prints and paintings--leaning edgewise against the wall, like roofing slates in a builder's yard. All the books visible here were folios too big to be stolen--some lying on a heavy oak table in one corner, some on the

floor among the pictures, the whole intermingled with old coats, hats, umbrellas, and walking-sticks.

Stephen pushed aside the curtain, and before him sat a man writing away as if his life depended upon it--which it did.

A man of thirty in a speckled coat, with dark brown hair, curly beard, and crisp moustache: the latter running into the beard on each side of the mouth, and, as usual, hiding the real expression of that organ under a chronic aspect of impassivity.

'Ah, my dear fellow, I knew 'twas you,' said Knight, looking up with a smile, and holding out his hand.

Knight's mouth and eyes came to view now. Both features were good, and had the peculiarity of appearing younger and fresher than the brow and face they belonged to, which were getting sicklied o'er by the unmistakable pale cast. The mouth had not quite relinquished rotundity of curve for the firm angularities of middle life; and the eyes, though keen, permeated rather than penetrated: what they had lost of their boy-time brightness by a dozen years of hard reading lending a quietness to their gaze which suited them well.

A lady would have said there was a smell of tobacco in the room: a man that there was not.

Knight did not rise. He looked at a timepiece on the mantelshelf, then turned again to his letters, pointing to a chair.

'Well, I am glad you have come. I only returned to town yesterday; now, don't speak, Stephen, for ten minutes; I have just that time to the late post. At the eleventh minute, I'm your man.'

Stephen sat down as if this kind of reception was by no means new, and away went Knight's pen, beating up and down like a ship in a storm.

Cicero called the library the soul of the house; here the house was all soul. Portions of the floor, and half the wall-space, were taken up by book-shelves ordinary and extraordinary; the remaining parts, together with brackets, side-tables, &c., being occupied by casts, statuettes, medallions, and plaques of various descriptions, picked up by the owner in his wanderings through France and Italy.

One stream only of evening sunlight came into the room from a window quite in the corner, overlooking a court. An aquarium stood in the window. It was a dull parallelopipedon enough for living creatures at most hours of the day; but for a few minutes in the evening, as now, an errant, kindly ray lighted up and warmed the little world therein, when the many-coloured zoophytes opened and put forth their arms, the weeds acquired a rich transparency, the shells gleamed of a more golden yellow, and the timid community expressed gladness more plainly than in words.

Within the prescribed ten minutes Knight flung down his pen, rang for the boy to take the letters to the post, and at the closing of the door exclaimed, 'There; thank God, that's done. Now, Stephen, pull your chair round, and tell me what you have been doing all this time. Have you kept up your Greek?'

'No.'

'How's that?'

'I haven't enough spare time.'

'That's nonsense.'

'Well, I have done a great many things, if not that. And I have done one extraordinary thing.'

Knight turned full upon Stephen. 'Ah-ha! Now, then, let me look into your face, put two and two together, and make a shrewd guess.'

Stephen changed to a redder colour.

'Why, Smith,' said Knight, after holding him rigidly by the shoulders, and keenly scrutinising his countenance for a minute in silence, 'you have fallen in love.'

'Well--the fact is----'

'Now, out with it.' But seeing that Stephen looked rather distressed, he changed to a kindly tone. 'Now Smith, my lad, you know me well enough by this time, or you ought to; and you know very well that if you choose to give me a detailed account of the phenomenon within you, I shall listen; if you don't, I am the last man in the world to care to hear it.'

'I'll tell this much: I HAVE fallen in love, and I want to be MARRIED.'

Knight looked ominous as this passed Stephen's lips.

'Don't judge me before you have heard more,' cried Stephen anxiously, seeing the change in his friend's countenance.

'I don't judge. Does your mother know about it?'

'Nothing definite.'

'Father?'

'No. But I'll tell you. The young person----'

'Come, that's dreadfully ungentlemanly. But perhaps I understand the frame of mind a little, so go on. Your sweetheart----'

'She is rather higher in the world than I am.'

'As it should be.'

'And her father won't hear of it, as I now stand.'

'Not an uncommon case.'

'And now comes what I want your advice upon. Something has happened at her house which makes it out of the question for us to ask her father again now. So we are keeping silent. In the meantime an architect in India has just written to Mr. Hewby to ask whether he can find for him a young assistant willing to go over to Bombay to prepare drawings for work formerly done by the engineers. The salary he offers is 350 rupees a month, or about 35 Pounds. Hewby has mentioned it to me, and I have been to Dr. Wray, who says I shall acclimatise without much illness. Now, would you go?'

'You mean to say, because it is a possible road to the young lady.'

'Yes; I was thinking I could go over and make a little money, and then come back and ask for her. I have the option of practising for myself after a year.'

'Would she be staunch?'

'Oh yes! For ever--to the end of her life!'

'How do you know?'

'Why, how do people know? Of course, she will.'

Knight leant back in his chair. 'Now, though I know her thoroughly as she exists in your heart, Stephen, I don't know her in the flesh. All I want to ask is, is this idea of going to India based entirely upon a belief in her fidelity?'

'Yes; I should not go if it were not for her.'

'Well, Stephen, you have put me in rather an awkward position. If I give my true sentiments, I shall hurt your feelings; if I don't, I shall hurt my own judgment. And remember, I don't know much about women.'

'But you have had attachments, although you tell me very little about them.'

'And I only hope you'll continue to prosper till I tell you more.'

Stephen winced at this rap. 'I have never formed a deep attachment,' continued Knight. 'I never have found a woman worth it. Nor have I been once engaged to be married.'

'You write as if you had been engaged a hundred times, if I may be allowed to say so,' said Stephen in an injured tone.

'Yes, that may be. But, my dear Stephen, it is only those who half know a thing that write about it. Those who know it thoroughly don't take the trouble. All I know about women, or men either, is a mass of generalities. I plod along, and occasionally lift my eyes and skim the weltering surface of mankind lying between me and the horizon, as a crow might; no more.'

Knight stopped as if he had fallen into a train of thought, and Stephen looked with affectionate awe at a master whose mind, he believed, could swallow up at one meal all that his own head contained.

There was affective sympathy, but no great intellectual fellowship, between Knight and Stephen Smith. Knight had seen his young friend when the latter was a cherry-cheeked happy boy, had been interested in him, had kept his eye upon him, and generously helped the lad to books, till the mere connection of patronage grew to acquaintance, and that ripened to friendship. And so, though Smith was not at all the man Knight would have deliberately chosen as a friend--or even for one of a group of a dozen friends--he somehow was his friend. Circumstance, as usual, did it all. How many of us can say of our most intimate alter ego, leaving alone friends of the outer circle, that he is the man we should have chosen, as embodying the net result after adding up all the points in

human nature that we love, and principles we hold, and subtracting all that we hate? The man is really somebody we got to know by mere physical juxtaposition long maintained, and was taken into our confidence, and even heart, as a makeshift.

'And what do you think of her?' Stephen ventured to say, after a silence.

'Taking her merits on trust from you,' said Knight, 'as we do those of the Roman poets of whom we know nothing but that they lived, I still think she will not stick to you through, say, three years of absence in India.'

'But she will!' cried Stephen desperately. 'She is a girl all delicacy and honour. And no woman of that kind, who has committed herself so into a man's hands as she has into mine, could possibly marry another.'

'How has she committed herself?' asked Knight curiously.

Stephen did not answer. Knight had looked on his love so sceptically that it would not do to say all that he had intended to say by any means.

'Well, don't tell,' said Knight. 'But you are begging the question, which is, I suppose, inevitable in love.'

'And I'll tell you another thing,' the younger man pleaded. 'You remember what you said to me once about women receiving a kiss. Don't you? Why, that instead of our being charmed by the fascination of their bearing at such a time, we should immediately doubt them if their confusion has any GRACE in it--that awkward bungling was the true charm of the occasion, implying that we are the first who has played such a part with them.'

'It is true, quite,' said Knight musingly.

It often happened that the disciple thus remembered the lessons of the master long after the master himself had forgotten them.

'Well, that was like her!' cried Stephen triumphantly. 'She was in such a flurry that she didn't know what she was doing.'

'Splendid, splendid!' said Knight soothingly. 'So that all I have to say is, that if you see a good opening in Bombay there's no reason why you should not go without troubling to draw fine distinctions as to reasons. No man fully realizes what opinions he acts upon, or what his actions mean.'

'Yes; I go to Bombay. I'll write a note here, if you don't mind.'

'Sleep over it--it is the best plan--and write to-morrow. Meantime, go there to that window and sit down, and look at my Humanity Show. I

am going to dine out this evening, and have to dress here out of my portmanteau. I bring up my things like this to save the trouble of going down to my place at Richmond and back again.'

Knight then went to the middle of the room and flung open his portmanteau, and Stephen drew near the window. The streak of sunlight had crept upward, edged away, and vanished; the zoophytes slept: a dusky gloom pervaded the room. And now another volume of light shone over the window.

'There!' said Knight, 'where is there in England a spectacle to equal that? I sit there and watch them every night before I go home. Softly open the sash.'

Beneath them was an alley running up to the wall, and thence turning sideways and passing under an arch, so that Knight's back window was immediately over the angle, and commanded a view of the alley lengthwise. Crowds--mostly of women--were surging, bustling, and pacing up and down. Gaslights glared from butchers' stalls, illuminating the lumps of flesh to splotches of orange and vermilion, like the wild colouring of Turner's later pictures, whilst the purl and babble of tongues of every pitch and mood was to this human wild-wood what the ripple of a brook is to the natural forest.

Nearly ten minutes passed. Then Knight also came to the window.

'Well, now, I call a cab and vanish down the street in the direction of Berkeley Square,' he said, buttoning his waistcoat and kicking his morning suit into a corner. Stephen rose to leave.

'What a heap of literature!' remarked the young man, taking a final longing survey round the room, as if to abide there for ever would be the great pleasure of his life, yet feeling that he had almost outstayed his welcome-while. His eyes rested upon an arm-chair piled full of newspapers, magazines, and bright new volumes in green and red.

'Yes,' said Knight, also looking at them and breathing a sigh of weariness; 'something must be done with several of them soon, I suppose. Stephen, you needn't hurry away for a few minutes, you know, if you want to stay; I am not quite ready. Overhaul those volumes whilst I put on my coat, and I'll walk a little way with you.'

Stephen sat down beside the arm-chair and began to tumble the books about. Among the rest he found a novelette in one volume, THE COURT OF KELLYON CASTLE. By Ernest Field.

'Are you going to review this?' inquired Stephen with apparent unconcern, and holding up Elfride's effusion.

'Which? Oh, that! I may--though I don't do much light reviewing now. But it is reviewable.'

'How do you mean?'

Knight never liked to be asked what he meant. 'Mean! I mean that the majority of books published are neither good enough nor bad enough to provoke criticism, and that that book does provoke it.'

'By its goodness or its badness?' Stephen said with some anxiety on poor little Elfride's score.

'Its badness. It seems to be written by some girl in her teens.'

Stephen said not another word. He did not care to speak plainly of Elfride after that unfortunate slip his tongue had made in respect of her having committed herself; and, apart from that, Knight's severe--almost dogged and self-willed--honesty in criticizing was unassailable by the humble wish of a youthful friend like Stephen.

Knight was now ready. Turning off the gas, and slamming together the door, they went downstairs and into the street.