Chapter XIV

'We frolic while 'tis May.'

It has now to be realized that nearly three-quarters of a year have passed away. In place of the autumnal scenery which formed a setting to the previous enactments, we have the culminating blooms of summer in the year following.

Stephen is in India, slaving away at an office in Bombay; occasionally going up the country on professional errands, and wondering why people who had been there longer than he complained so much of the effect of the climate upon their constitutions. Never had a young man a finer start than seemed now to present itself to Stephen. It was just in that exceptional heyday of prosperity which shone over Bombay some few years ago, that he arrived on the scene. Building and engineering partook of the general impetus. Speculation moved with an accelerated velocity every successive day, the only disagreeable contingency connected with it being the possibility of a collapse.

Elfride had never told her father of the four-and-twenty-hours' escapade with Stephen, nor had it, to her knowledge, come to his ears by any other route. It was a secret trouble and grief to the girl for a short time, and Stephen's departure was another ingredient in her sorrow. But Elfride possessed special facilities for getting rid of trouble after a

decent interval. Whilst a slow nature was imbibing a misfortune little by little, she had swallowed the whole agony of it at a draught and was brightening again. She could slough off a sadness and replace it by a hope as easily as a lizard renews a diseased limb.

And two such excellent distractions had presented themselves. One was bringing out the romance and looking for notices in the papers, which, though they had been significantly short so far, had served to divert her thoughts. The other was migrating from the vicarage to the more commodious old house of Mrs. Swancourt's, overlooking the same valley. Mr. Swancourt at first disliked the idea of being transplanted to feminine soil, but the obvious advantages of such an accession of dignity reconciled him to the change. So there was a radical 'move;' the two ladies staying at Torquay as had been arranged, the vicar going to and fro.

Mrs. Swancourt considerably enlarged Elfride's ideas in an aristocratic direction, and she began to forgive her father for his politic marriage. Certainly, in a worldly sense, a handsome face at three-and-forty had never served a man in better stead.

The new house at Kensington was ready, and they were all in town.

The Hyde Park shrubs had been transplanted as usual, the chairs ranked in line, the grass edgings trimmed, the roads made to look as if they

were suffering from a heavy thunderstorm; carriages had been called for by the easeful, horses by the brisk, and the Drive and Row were again the groove of gaiety for an hour. We gaze upon the spectacle, at six o'clock on this midsummer afternoon, in a melon-frame atmosphere and beneath a violet sky. The Swancourt equipage formed one in the stream.

Mrs. Swancourt was a talker of talk of the incisive kind, which her low musical voice--the only beautiful point in the old woman--prevented from being wearisome.

'Now,' she said to Elfride, who, like AEneas at Carthage, was full of admiration for the brilliant scene, 'you will find that our companionless state will give us, as it does everybody, an extraordinary power in reading the features of our fellow-creatures here. I always am a listener in such places as these--not to the narratives told by my neighbours' tongues, but by their faces--the advantage of which is, that whether I am in Row, Boulevard, Rialto, or Prado, they all speak the same language. I may have acquired some skill in this practice through having been an ugly lonely woman for so many years, with nobody to give me information; a thing you will not consider strange when the parallel case is borne in mind,--how truly people who have no clocks will tell the time of day.'

'Ay, that they will,' said Mr. Swancourt corroboratively. 'I have known labouring men at Endelstow and other farms who had framed complete systems of observation for that purpose. By means of shadows, winds,

clouds, the movements of sheep and oxen, the singing of birds, the crowing of cocks, and a hundred other sights and sounds which people with watches in their pockets never know the existence of, they are able to pronounce within ten minutes of the hour almost at any required instant. That reminds me of an old story which I'm afraid is too bad--too bad to repeat.' Here the vicar shook his head and laughed inwardly.

'Tell it--do!' said the ladies.

'I mustn't quite tell it.'

'That's absurd,' said Mrs. Swancourt.

'It was only about a man who, by the same careful system of observation, was known to deceive persons for more than two years into the belief that he kept a barometer by stealth, so exactly did he foretell all changes in the weather by the braying of his ass and the temper of his wife.'

Elfride laughed.

'Exactly,' said Mrs. Swancourt. 'And in just the way that those learnt the signs of nature, I have learnt the language of her illegitimate sister--artificiality; and the fibbing of eyes, the contempt of nose-tips, the indignation of back hair, the laughter of clothes, the

cynicism of footsteps, and the various emotions lying in walking-stick twirls, hat-liftings, the elevation of parasols, the carriage of umbrellas, become as A B C to me.

'Just look at that daughter's sister class of mamma in the carriage across there,' she continued to Elfride, pointing with merely a turn of her eye. 'The absorbing self-consciousness of her position that is shown by her countenance is most humiliating to a lover of one's country. You would hardly believe, would you, that members of a Fashionable World, whose professed zero is far above the highest degree of the humble, could be so ignorant of the elementary instincts of reticence.'

'How?'

'Why, to bear on their faces, as plainly as on a phylactery, the inscription, "Do, pray, look at the coronet on my panels."'

'Really, Charlotte,' said the vicar, 'you see as much in faces as Mr. Puff saw in Lord Burleigh's nod.'

Elfride could not but admire the beauty of her fellow countrywomen, especially since herself and her own few acquaintances had always been slightly sunburnt or marked on the back of the hands by a bramble-scratch at this time of the year.

'And what lovely flowers and leaves they wear in their bonnets!' she

exclaimed.

'Oh yes,' returned Mrs. Swancourt. 'Some of them are even more striking in colour than any real ones. Look at that beautiful rose worn by the lady inside the rails. Elegant vine-tendrils introduced upon the stem as an improvement upon prickles, and all growing so naturally just over her ear--I say growing advisedly, for the pink of the petals and the pink of her handsome cheeks are equally from Nature's hand to the eyes of the most casual observer.'

'But praise them a little, they do deserve it!' said generous Elfride.

'Well, I do. See how the Duchess of----waves to and fro in her seat, utilizing the sway of her landau by looking around only when her head is swung forward, with a passive pride which forbids a resistance to the force of circumstance. Look at the pretty pout on the mouths of that family there, retaining no traces of being arranged beforehand, so well is it done. Look at the demure close of the little fists holding the parasols; the tiny alert thumb, sticking up erect against the ivory stem as knowing as can be, the satin of the parasol invariably matching the complexion of the face beneath it, yet seemingly by an accident, which makes the thing so attractive. There's the red book lying on the opposite seat, bespeaking the vast numbers of their acquaintance. And I particularly admire the aspect of that abundantly daughtered woman on the other side--I mean her look of unconsciousness that the girls are stared at by the walkers, and above all the look of the girls

themselves--losing their gaze in the depths of handsome men's eyes without appearing to notice whether they are observing masculine eyes or the leaves of the trees. There's praise for you. But I am only jesting, child--you know that.'

'Piph-ph-ph--how warm it is, to be sure!' said Mr. Swancourt, as if his mind were a long distance from all he saw. 'I declare that my watch is so hot that I can scarcely bear to touch it to see what the time is, and all the world smells like the inside of a hat.'

'How the men stare at you, Elfride!' said the elder lady. 'You will kill me quite, I am afraid.'

'Kill you?'

'As a diamond kills an opal in the same setting.'

'I have noticed several ladies and gentlemen looking at me,' said Elfride artlessly, showing her pleasure at being observed.

'My dear, you mustn't say "gentlemen" nowadays,' her stepmother answered in the tones of arch concern that so well became her ugliness. 'We have handed over "gentlemen" to the lower middle class, where the word is still to be heard at tradesmen's balls and provincial tea-parties, I believe. It is done with here.'

'What must I say, then?'

'"Ladies and MEN" always.'

At this moment appeared in the stream of vehicles moving in the contrary direction a chariot presenting in its general surface the rich indigo hue of a midnight sky, the wheels and margins being picked out in delicate lines of ultramarine; the servants' liveries were dark-blue coats and silver lace, and breeches of neutral Indian red. The whole concern formed an organic whole, and moved along behind a pair of dark chestnut geldings, who advanced in an indifferently zealous trot, very daintily performed, and occasionally shrugged divers points of their veiny surface as if they were rather above the business.

In this sat a gentleman with no decided characteristics more than that he somewhat resembled a good-natured commercial traveller of the superior class. Beside him was a lady with skim-milky eyes and complexion, belonging to the "interesting" class of women, where that class merges in the sickly, her greatest pleasure being apparently to enjoy nothing. Opposite this pair sat two little girls in white hats and blue feathers.

The lady saw Elfride, smiled and bowed, and touched her husband's elbow, who turned and received Elfride's movement of recognition with a gallant elevation of his hat. Then the two children held up their arms to Elfride, and laughed gleefully.

'Who is that?'

'Why, Lord Luxellian, isn't it?' said Mrs. Swancourt, who with the vicar had been seated with her back towards them.

'Yes,' replied Elfride. 'He is the one man of those I have seen here whom I consider handsomer than papa.'

'Thank you, dear,' said Mr. Swancourt.

'Yes; but your father is so much older. When Lord Luxellian gets a little further on in life, he won't be half so good-looking as our man.'

'Thank you, dear, likewise,' said Mr. Swancourt.

'See,' exclaimed Elfride, still looking towards them, 'how those little dears want me! Actually one of them is crying for me to come.'

'We were talking of bracelets just now. Look at Lady Luxellian's,' said Mrs. Swancourt, as that baroness lifted up her arm to support one of the children. 'It is slipping up her arm--too large by half. I hate to see daylight between a bracelet and a wrist; I wonder women haven't better taste.'

'It is not on that account, indeed,' Elfride expostulated. 'It is that

her arm has got thin, poor thing. You cannot think how much she has altered in this last twelvemonth.'

The carriages were now nearer together, and there was an exchange of more familiar greetings between the two families. Then the Luxellians crossed over and drew up under the plane-trees, just in the rear of the Swancourts. Lord Luxellian alighted, and came forward with a musical laugh.

It was his attraction as a man. People liked him for those tones, and forgot that he had no talents. Acquaintances remembered Mr. Swancourt by his manner; they remembered Stephen Smith by his face, Lord Luxellian by his laugh.

Mr. Swancourt made some friendly remarks--among others things upon the heat.

'Yes,' said Lord Luxellian, 'we were driving by a furrier's window this afternoon, and the sight filled us all with such a sense of suffocation that we were glad to get away. Ha-ha!' He turned to Elfride. 'Miss Swancourt, I have hardly seen or spoken to you since your literary feat was made public. I had no idea a chiel was taking notes down at quiet Endelstow, or I should certainly have put myself and friends upon our best behaviour. Swancourt, why didn't you give me a hint!'

Elfride fluttered, blushed, laughed, said it was nothing to speak of,

&c. &c.

'Well, I think you were rather unfairly treated by the PRESENT, I certainly do. Writing a heavy review like that upon an elegant trifle like the COURT OF KELLYON CASTLE was absurd.'

'What?' said Elfride, opening her eyes. 'Was I reviewed in the PRESENT?'

'Oh yes; didn't you see it? Why, it was four or five months ago!'

'No, I never saw it. How sorry I am! What a shame of my publishers! They promised to send me every notice that appeared.'

'Ah, then, I am almost afraid I have been giving you disagreeable information, intentionally withheld out of courtesy. Depend upon it they thought no good would come of sending it, and so would not pain you unnecessarily.'

'Oh no; I am indeed glad you have told me, Lord Luxellian. It is quite a mistaken kindness on their part. Is the review so much against me?' she inquired tremulously.

'No, no; not that exactly--though I almost forget its exact purport now. It was merely--merely sharp, you know--ungenerous, I might say. But really my memory does not enable me to speak decidedly.'

'We'll drive to the PRESENT office, and get one directly; shall we, papa?'

'If you are so anxious, dear, we will, or send. But to-morrow will do.'

'And do oblige me in a little matter now, Elfride,' said Lord Luxellian warmly, and looking as if he were sorry he had brought news that disturbed her. 'I am in reality sent here as a special messenger by my little Polly and Katie to ask you to come into our carriage with them for a short time. I am just going to walk across into Piccadilly, and my wife is left alone with them. I am afraid they are rather spoilt children; but I have half promised them you shall come.'

The steps were let down, and Elfride was transferred--to the intense delight of the little girls, and to the mild interest of loungers with red skins and long necks, who cursorily eyed the performance with their walking-sticks to their lips, occasionally laughing from far down their throats and with their eyes, their mouths not being concerned in the operation at all. Lord Luxellian then told the coachman to drive on, lifted his hat, smiled a smile that missed its mark and alighted on a total stranger, who bowed in bewilderment. Lord Luxellian looked long at Elfride.

The look was a manly, open, and genuine look of admiration; a momentary tribute of a kind which any honest Englishman might have paid to fairness without being ashamed of the feeling, or permitting it to

encroach in the slightest degree upon his emotional obligations as a husband and head of a family. Then Lord Luxellian turned away, and walked musingly to the upper end of the promenade.

Mr. Swancourt had alighted at the same time with Elfride, crossing over to the Row for a few minutes to speak to a friend he recognized there; and his wife was thus left sole tenant of the carriage.

Now, whilst this little act had been in course of performance, there stood among the promenading spectators a man of somewhat different description from the rest. Behind the general throng, in the rear of the chairs, and leaning against the trunk of a tree, he looked at Elfride with quiet and critical interest.

Three points about this unobtrusive person showed promptly to the exercised eye that he was not a Row man pur sang. First, an irrepressible wrinkle or two in the waist of his frock-coat--denoting that he had not damned his tailor sufficiently to drive that tradesman up to the orthodox high pressure of cunning workmanship. Second, a slight slovenliness of umbrella, occasioned by its owner's habit of resting heavily upon it, and using it as a veritable walking-stick, instead of letting its point touch the ground in the most coquettish of kisses, as is the proper Row manner to do. Third, and chief reason, that try how you might, you could scarcely help supposing, on looking at his face, that your eyes were not far from a well-finished mind, instead of the well-finished skin et praeterea nihil, which is by rights the Mark

of the Row.

The probability is that, had not Mrs. Swancourt been left alone in her carriage under the tree, this man would have remained in his unobserved seclusion. But seeing her thus, he came round to the front, stooped under the rail, and stood beside the carriage-door.

Mrs. Swancourt looked reflectively at him for a quarter of a minute, then held out her hand laughingly:

'Why, Henry Knight--of course it is! My--second--third--fourth cousin--what shall I say? At any rate, my kinsman.'

'Yes, one of a remnant not yet cut off. I scarcely was certain of you, either, from where I was standing.'

'I have not seen you since you first went to Oxford; consider the number of years! You know, I suppose, of my marriage?'

And there sprang up a dialogue concerning family matters of birth, death, and marriage, which it is not necessary to detail. Knight presently inquired:

'The young lady who changed into the other carriage is, then, your stepdaughter?'

'Yes, Elfride. You must know her.'

'And who was the lady in the carriage Elfride entered; who had an ill-defined and watery look, as if she were only the reflection of herself in a pool?'

'Lady Luxellian; very weakly, Elfride says. My husband is remotely connected with them; but there is not much intimacy on account of----. However, Henry, you'll come and see us, of course. 24 Chevron Square. Come this week. We shall only be in town a week or two longer.'

'Let me see. I've got to run up to Oxford to-morrow, where I shall be for several days; so that I must, I fear, lose the pleasure of seeing you in London this year.'

'Then come to Endelstow; why not return with us?'

'I am afraid if I were to come before August I should have to leave again in a day or two. I should be delighted to be with you at the beginning of that month; and I could stay a nice long time. I have thought of going westward all the summer.'

'Very well. Now remember that's a compact. And won't you wait now and see Mr. Swancourt? He will not be away ten minutes longer.'

'No; I'll beg to be excused; for I must get to my chambers again this

evening before I go home; indeed, I ought to have been there now--I have such a press of matters to attend to just at present. You will explain to him, please. Good-bye.'

'And let us know the day of your appearance as soon as you can.'

'I will'