

Chapter XV

'A wandering voice.'

Though sheer and intelligible griefs are not charmed away by being confided to mere acquaintances, the process is a palliative to certain ill-humours. Among these, perplexed vexation is one--a species of trouble which, like a stream, gets shallower by the simple operation of widening it in any quarter.

On the evening of the day succeeding that of the meeting in the Park, Elfride and Mrs. Swancourt were engaged in conversation in the dressing-room of the latter. Such a treatment of such a case was in course of adoption here.

Elfride had just before received an affectionate letter from Stephen Smith in Bombay, which had been forwarded to her from Endelstow. But since this is not the case referred to, it is not worth while to pry further into the contents of the letter than to discover that, with rash though pardonable confidence in coming times, he addressed her in high spirits as his darling future wife. Probably there cannot be instanced a briefer and surer rule-of-thumb test of a man's temperament--sanguine or cautious--than this: did he or does he ante-date the word wife in corresponding with a sweet-heart he honestly loves?

She had taken this epistle into her own room, read a little of it, then SAVED the rest for to-morrow, not wishing to be so extravagant as to consume the pleasure all at once. Nevertheless, she could not resist the wish to enjoy yet a little more, so out came the letter again, and in spite of misgivings as to prodigality the whole was devoured. The letter was finally reperused and placed in her pocket.

What was this? Also a newspaper for Elfride, which she had overlooked in her hurry to open the letter. It was the old number of the PRESENT, containing the article upon her book, forwarded as had been requested.

Elfride had hastily read it through, shrunk perceptibly smaller, and had then gone with the paper in her hand to Mrs. Swancourt's dressing-room, to lighten or at least modify her vexation by a discriminating estimate from her stepmother.

She was now looking disconsolately out of the window.

'Never mind, my child,' said Mrs. Swancourt after a careful perusal of the matter indicated. 'I don't see that the review is such a terrible one, after all. Besides, everybody has forgotten about it by this time. I'm sure the opening is good enough for any book ever written. Just listen--it sounds better read aloud than when you pore over it silently:

"THE COURT OF KELLYON CASTLE. A ROMANCE OF THE MIDDLE AGES.
BY ERNEST

FIELD. In the belief that we were for a while escaping the monotonous

repetition of wearisome details in modern social scenery, analyses of uninteresting character, or the unnatural unfoldings of a sensation plot, we took this volume into our hands with a feeling of pleasure. We were disposed to beguile ourselves with the fancy that some new change might possibly be rung upon donjon keeps, chain and plate armour, deeply scarred cheeks, tender maidens disguised as pages, to which we had not listened long ago." Now, that's a very good beginning, in my opinion, and one to be proud of having brought out of a man who has never seen you.'

'Ah, yes,' murmured Elfride wofully. 'But, then, see further on!'

'Well the next bit is rather unkind, I must own,' said Mrs. Swancourt, and read on. "'Instead of this we found ourselves in the hands of some young lady, hardly arrived at years of discretion, to judge by the silly device it has been thought worth while to adopt on the title-page, with the idea of disguising her sex.'"

'I am not "silly"!' said Elfride indignantly. 'He might have called me anything but that.'

'You are not, indeed. Well:--"Hands of a young lady...whose chapters are simply devoted to impossible tournaments, towers, and escapades, which read like flat copies of like scenes in the stories of Mr. G. P. R.

James, and the most unreal portions of IVANHOE. The bait is so palpably artificial that the most credulous gudgeon turns away." Now, my dear,

I don't see overmuch to complain of in that. It proves that you were clever enough to make him think of Sir Walter Scott, which is a great deal.'

'Oh yes; though I cannot romance myself, I am able to remind him of those who can!' Elfride intended to hurl these words sarcastically at her invisible enemy, but as she had no more satirical power than a wood-pigeon, they merely fell in a pretty murmur from lips shaped to a pout.

'Certainly: and that's something. Your book is good enough to be bad in an ordinary literary manner, and doesn't stand by itself in a melancholy position altogether worse than assailable.--"That interest in an historical romance may nowadays have any chance of being sustained, it is indispensable that the reader find himself under the guidance of some nearly extinct species of legendary, who, in addition to an impulse towards antiquarian research and an unweakened faith in the mediaeval halo, shall possess an inventive faculty in which delicacy of sentiment is far overtopped by a power of welding to stirring incident a spirited variety of the elementary human passions." Well, that long-winded effusion doesn't refer to you at all, Elfride, merely something put in to fill up. Let me see, when does he come to you again;...not till the very end, actually. Here you are finally polished off:

"But to return to the little work we have used as the text of this article. We are far from altogether disparaging the author's powers. She

has a certain versatility that enables her to use with effect a style of narration peculiar to herself, which may be called a murmuring of delicate emotional trifles, the particular gift of those to whom the social sympathies of a peaceful time are as daily food. Hence, where matters of domestic experience, and the natural touches which make people real, can be introduced without anachronisms too striking, she is occasionally felicitous; and upon the whole we feel justified in saying that the book will bear looking into for the sake of those portions which have nothing whatever to do with the story."

'Well, I suppose it is intended for satire; but don't think anything more of it now, my dear. It is seven o'clock.' And Mrs. Swancourt rang for her maid.

Attack is more piquant than concord. Stephen's letter was concerning nothing but oneness with her: the review was the very reverse. And a stranger with neither name nor shape, age nor appearance, but a mighty voice, is naturally rather an interesting novelty to a lady he chooses to address. When Elfride fell asleep that night she was loving the writer of the letter, but thinking of the writer of that article.