

Chapter XVI

'Then fancy shapes--as fancy can.'

On a day about three weeks later, the Swancourt trio were sitting quietly in the drawing-room of The Craggs, Mrs. Swancourt's house at Endelstow, chatting, and taking easeful survey of their previous month or two of town--a tangible weariness even to people whose acquaintances there might be counted on the fingers.

A mere season in London with her practised step-mother had so advanced Elfride's perceptions, that her courtship by Stephen seemed emotionally meagre, and to have drifted back several years into a childish past.

In regarding our mental experiences, as in visual observation, our own progress reads like a dwindling of that we progress from.

She was seated on a low chair, looking over her romance with melancholy interest for the first time since she had become acquainted with the remarks of the PRESENT thereupon.

'Still thinking of that reviewer, Elfie?'

'Not of him personally; but I am thinking of his opinion. Really, on looking into the volume after this long time has elapsed, he seems to have estimated one part of it fairly enough.'

'No, no; I wouldn't show the white feather now! Fancy that of all people in the world the writer herself should go over to the enemy. How shall Monmouth's men fight when Monmouth runs away?'

'I don't do that. But I think he is right in some of his arguments, though wrong in others. And because he has some claim to my respect I regret all the more that he should think so mistakenly of my motives in one or two instances. It is more vexing to be misunderstood than to be misrepresented; and he misunderstands me. I cannot be easy whilst a person goes to rest night after night attributing to me intentions I never had.'

'He doesn't know your name, or anything about you. And he has doubtless forgotten there is such a book in existence by this time.'

'I myself should certainly like him to be put right upon one or two matters,' said the vicar, who had hitherto been silent. 'You see, critics go on writing, and are never corrected or argued with, and therefore are never improved.'

'Papa,' said Elfride brightening, 'write to him!'

'I would as soon write to him as look at him, for the matter of that,' said Mr. Swancourt.

'Do! And say, the young person who wrote the book did not adopt a masculine pseudonym in vanity or conceit, but because she was afraid it would be thought presumptuous to publish her name, and that she did not mean the story for such as he, but as a sweetener of history for young people, who might thereby acquire a taste for what went on in their own country hundreds of years ago, and be tempted to dive deeper into the subject. Oh, there is so much to explain; I wish I might write myself!'

'Now, Elfie, I'll tell you what we will do,' answered Mr. Swancourt, tickled with a sort of bucolic humour at the idea of criticizing the critic. 'You shall write a clear account of what he is wrong in, and I will copy it and send it as mine.'

'Yes, now, directly!' said Elfride, jumping up. 'When will you send it, papa?'

'Oh, in a day or two, I suppose,' he returned. Then the vicar paused and slightly yawned, and in the manner of elderly people began to cool from his ardour for the undertaking now that it came to the point. 'But, really, it is hardly worth while,' he said.

'O papa!' said Elfride, with much disappointment. 'You said you would, and now you won't. That is not fair!'

'But how can we send it if we don't know whom to send it to?'

'If you really want to send such a thing it can easily be done,' said Mrs. Swancourt, coming to her step-daughter's rescue. 'An envelope addressed, "To the Critic of THE COURT OF KELLYON CASTLE, care of the Editor of the PRESENT," would find him.'

'Yes, I suppose it would.'

'Why not write your answer yourself, Elfride?' Mrs. Swancourt inquired.

'I might,' she said hesitatingly; 'and send it anonymously: that would be treating him as he has treated me.'

'No use in the world!'

'But I don't like to let him know my exact name. Suppose I put my initials only? The less you are known the more you are thought of.'

'Yes; you might do that.'

Elfride set to work there and then. Her one desire for the last fortnight seemed likely to be realized. As happens with sensitive and secluded minds, a continual dwelling upon the subject had magnified to colossal proportions the space she assumed herself to occupy or to have occupied in the occult critic's mind. At noon and at night she had been pestering herself with endeavours to perceive more distinctly his conception of her as a woman apart from an author: whether he really

despised her; whether he thought more or less of her than of ordinary young women who never ventured into the fire of criticism at all. Now she would have the satisfaction of feeling that at any rate he knew her true intent in crossing his path, and annoying him so by her performance, and be taught perhaps to despise it a little less.

Four days later an envelope, directed to Miss Swancourt in a strange hand, made its appearance from the post-bag.

'Oh,' said Elfride, her heart sinking within her. 'Can it be from that man--a lecture for impertinence? And actually one for Mrs. Swancourt in the same hand-writing!' She feared to open hers. 'Yet how can he know my name? No; it is somebody else.'

'Nonsense!' said her father grimly. 'You sent your initials, and the Directory was available. Though he wouldn't have taken the trouble to look there unless he had been thoroughly savage with you. I thought you wrote with rather more asperity than simple literary discussion required.' This timely clause was introduced to save the character of the vicar's judgment under any issue of affairs.

'Well, here I go,' said Elfride, desperately tearing open the seal.

'To be sure, of course,' exclaimed Mrs. Swancourt; and looking up from her own letter. 'Christopher, I quite forgot to tell you, when I mentioned that I had seen my distant relative, Harry Knight, that I

invited him here for whatever length of time he could spare. And now he says he can come any day in August.'

'Write, and say the first of the month,' replied the indiscriminate vicar.

She read on, 'Goodness me--and that isn't all. He is actually the reviewer of Elfride's book. How absurd, to be sure! I had no idea he reviewed novels or had anything to do with the PRESENT. He is a barrister--and I thought he only wrote in the Quarterlies. Why, Elfride, you have brought about an odd entanglement! What does he say to you?'

Elfride had put down her letter with a dissatisfied flush on her face.

'I don't know. The idea of his knowing my name and all about me!...Why, he says nothing particular, only this--

"MY DEAR MADAM,--Though I am sorry that my remarks should have seemed

harsh to you, it is a pleasure to find that they have been the means of bringing forth such an ingeniously argued reply. Unfortunately, it is so long since I wrote my review, that my memory does not serve me sufficiently to say a single word in my defence, even supposing there remains one to be said, which is doubtful. You will find from a letter I have written to Mrs. Swancourt, that we are not such strangers to each other as we have been imagining. Possibly, I may have the pleasure of

seeing you soon, when any argument you choose to advance shall receive all the attention it deserves."

'That is dim sarcasm--I know it is.'

'Oh no, Elfride.'

'And then, his remarks didn't seem harsh--I mean I did not say so.'

'He thinks you are in a frightful temper,' said Mr. Swancourt, chuckling in undertones.

'And he will come and see me, and find the authoress as contemptible in speech as she has been impertinent in manner. I do heartily wish I had never written a word to him!'

'Never mind,' said Mrs. Swancourt, also laughing in low quiet jerks; 'it will make the meeting such a comical affair, and afford splendid by-play for your father and myself. The idea of our running our heads against Harry Knight all the time! I cannot get over that.'

The vicar had immediately remembered the name to be that of Stephen Smith's preceptor and friend; but having ceased to concern himself in the matter he made no remark to that effect, consistently forbearing to allude to anything which could restore recollection of the (to him)

disagreeable mistake with regard to poor Stephen's lineage and position. Elfride had of course perceived the same thing, which added to the complication of relationship a mesh that her stepmother knew nothing of.

The identification scarcely heightened Knight's attractions now, though a twelvemonth ago she would only have cared to see him for the interest he possessed as Stephen's friend. Fortunately for Knight's advent, such a reason for welcome had only begun to be awkward to her at a time when the interest he had acquired on his own account made it no longer necessary.

These coincidences, in common with all relating to him, tended to keep Elfride's mind upon the stretch concerning Knight. As was her custom when upon the horns of a dilemma, she walked off by herself among the laurel bushes, and there, standing still and splitting up a leaf without removing it from its stalk, fetched back recollections of Stephen's frequent words in praise of his friend, and wished she had listened more attentively. Then, still pulling the leaf, she would blush at some fancied mortification that would accrue to her from his words when they met, in consequence of her intrusiveness, as she now considered it, in writing to him.

The next development of her meditations was the subject of what this man's personal appearance might be--was he tall or short, dark or fair, gay or grim? She would have asked Mrs. Swancourt but for the risk she

might thereby incur of some teasing remark being returned. Ultimately Elfride would say, 'Oh, what a plague that reviewer is to me!' and turn her face to where she imagined India lay, and murmur to herself, 'Ah, my little husband, what are you doing now? Let me see, where are you--south, east, where? Behind that hill, ever so far behind!'