Chapter XVII

'Her welcome, spoke in faltering phrase.'

'There is Henry Knight, I declare!' said Mrs. Swancourt one day.

They were gazing from the jutting angle of a wild enclosure not far from The Crags, which almost overhung the valley already described as leading up from the sea and little port of Castle Boterel. The stony escarpment upon which they stood had the contour of a man's face, and it was covered with furze as with a beard. People in the field above were preserved from an accidental roll down these prominences and hollows by a hedge on the very crest, which was doing that kindly service for Elfride and her mother now.

Scrambling higher into the hedge and stretching her neck further over the furze, Elfride beheld the individual signified. He was walking leisurely along the little green path at the bottom, beside the stream, a satchel slung upon his left hip, a stout walking-stick in his hand, and a brown-holland sun-hat upon his head. The satchel was worn and old, and the outer polished surface of the leather was cracked and peeling off.

Knight having arrived over the hills to Castle Boterel upon the top of a crazy omnibus, preferred to walk the remaining two miles up the valley,

leaving his luggage to be brought on.

Behind him wandered, helter-skelter, a boy of whom Knight had briefly inquired the way to Endelstow; and by that natural law of physics which causes lesser bodies to gravitate towards the greater, this boy had kept near to Knight, and trotted like a little dog close at his heels, whistling as he went, with his eyes fixed upon Knight's boots as they rose and fell.

When they had reached a point precisely opposite that in which Mrs. and Miss Swancourt lay in ambush, Knight stopped and turned round.

'Look here, my boy,' he said.

The boy parted his lips, opened his eyes, and answered nothing.

'Here's sixpence for you, on condition that you don't again come within twenty yards of my heels, all the way up the valley.'

The boy, who apparently had not known he had been looking at Knight's heels at all, took the sixpence mechanically, and Knight went on again, wrapt in meditation.

'A nice voice,' Elfride thought; 'but what a singular temper!'

'Now we must get indoors before he ascends the slope,' said Mrs.

Swancourt softly. And they went across by a short cut over a stile, entering the lawn by a side door, and so on to the house.

Mr. Swancourt had gone into the village with the curate, and Elfride felt too nervous to await their visitor's arrival in the drawing-room with Mrs. Swancourt. So that when the elder lady entered, Elfride made some pretence of perceiving a new variety of crimson geranium, and lingered behind among the flower beds.

There was nothing gained by this, after all, she thought; and a few minutes after boldly came into the house by the glass side-door. She walked along the corridor, and entered the drawing-room. Nobody was there.

A window at the angle of the room opened directly into an octagonal conservatory, enclosing the corner of the building. From the conservatory came voices in conversation--Mrs. Swancourt's and the stranger's.

She had expected him to talk brilliantly. To her surprise he was asking questions in quite a learner's manner, on subjects connected with the flowers and shrubs that she had known for years. When after the lapse of a few minutes he spoke at some length, she considered there was a hard square decisiveness in the shape of his sentences, as if, unlike her own and Stephen's, they were not there and then newly constructed, but were drawn forth from a large store ready-made. They were now approaching the

window to come in again.

'That is a flesh-coloured variety,' said Mrs. Swancourt. 'But oleanders, though they are such bulky shrubs, are so very easily wounded as to be unprunable--giants with the sensitiveness of young ladies. Oh, here is Elfride!'

Elfride looked as guilty and crestfallen as Lady Teazle at the dropping of the screen. Mrs. Swancourt presented him half comically, and Knight in a minute or two placed himself beside the young lady.

A complexity of instincts checked Elfride's conventional smiles of complaisance and hospitality; and, to make her still less comfortable, Mrs. Swancourt immediately afterwards left them together to seek her husband. Mr. Knight, however, did not seem at all incommoded by his feelings, and he said with light easefulness:

'So, Miss Swancourt, I have met you at last. You escaped me by a few minutes only when we were in London.'

'Yes. I found that you had seen Mrs. Swancourt.'

'And now reviewer and reviewed are face to face,' he added unconcernedly.

'Yes: though the fact of your being a relation of Mrs. Swancourt's takes

off the edge of it. It was strange that you should be one of her family all the time.' Elfride began to recover herself now, and to look into Knight's face. 'I was merely anxious to let you know my REAL meaning in writing the book--extremely anxious.'

'I can quite understand the wish; and I was gratified that my remarks should have reached home. They very seldom do, I am afraid.'

Elfride drew herself in. Here he was, sticking to his opinions as firmly as if friendship and politeness did not in the least require an immediate renunciation of them.

'You made me very uneasy and sorry by writing such things!' she murmured, suddenly dropping the mere cacueterie of a fashionable first introduction, and speaking with some of the dudgeon of a child towards a severe schoolmaster.

'That is rather the object of honest critics in such a case. Not to cause unnecessary sorrow, but: "To make you sorry after a proper manner, that ye may receive damage by us in nothing," as a powerful pen once wrote to the Gentiles. Are you going to write another romance?'

'Write another?' she said. 'That somebody may pen a condemnation and "nail't wi' Scripture" again, as you do now, Mr. Knight?'

'You may do better next time,' he said placidly: 'I think you will. But

I would advise you to confine yourself to domestic scenes.'

'Thank you. But never again!'

'Well, you may be right. That a young woman has taken to writing is not by any means the best thing to hear about her.'

'What is the best?'

'I prefer not to say.'

'Do you know? Then, do tell me, please.'

'Well'--(Knight was evidently changing his meaning)--'I suppose to hear that she has married.'

Elfride hesitated. 'And what when she has been married?' she said at last, partly in order to withdraw her own person from the argument.

'Then to hear no more about her. It is as Smeaton said of his lighthouse: her greatest real praise, when the novelty of her inauguration has worn off, is that nothing happens to keep the talk of her alive.'

'Yes, I see,' said Elfride softly and thoughtfully. 'But of course it is different quite with men. Why don't you write novels, Mr. Knight?'

'Because I couldn't write one that would interest anybody.'

'Why?'

'For several reasons. It requires a judicious omission of your real thoughts to make a novel popular, for one thing.'

'Is that really necessary? Well, I am sure you could learn to do that with practice,' said Elfride with an ex-cathedra air, as became a person who spoke from experience in the art. 'You would make a great name for certain,' she continued.

'So many people make a name nowadays, that it is more distinguished to remain in obscurity.'

'Tell me seriously--apart from the subject--why don't you write a volume instead of loose articles?' she insisted.

'Since you are pleased to make me talk of myself, I will tell you seriously,' said Knight, not less amused at this catechism by his young friend than he was interested in her appearance. 'As I have implied, I have not the wish. And if I had the wish, I could not now concentrate sufficiently. We all have only our one cruse of energy given us to make the best of. And where that energy has been leaked away week by week, quarter by quarter, as mine has for the last nine or ten years, there is

not enough dammed back behind the mill at any given period to supply the force a complete book on any subject requires. Then there is the self-confidence and waiting power. Where quick results have grown customary, they are fatal to a lively faith in the future.'

'Yes, I comprehend; and so you choose to write in fragments?'

'No, I don't choose to do it in the sense you mean; choosing from a whole world of professions, all possible. It was by the constraint of accident merely. Not that I object to the accident.'

'Why don't you object--I mean, why do you feel so quiet about things?' Elfride was half afraid to question him so, but her intense curiosity to see what the inside of literary Mr. Knight was like, kept her going on.

Knight certainly did not mind being frank with her. Instances of this trait in men who are not without feeling, but are reticent from habit, may be recalled by all of us. When they find a listener who can by no possibility make use of them, rival them, or condemn them, reserved and even suspicious men of the world become frank, keenly enjoying the inner side of their frankness.

'Why I don't mind the accidental constraint,' he replied, 'is because, in making beginnings, a chance limitation of direction is often better than absolute freedom.'

'I see--that is, I should if I quite understood what all those generalities mean.'

'Why, this: That an arbitrary foundation for one's work, which no length of thought can alter, leaves the attention free to fix itself on the work itself, and make the best of it.'

'Lateral compression forcing altitude, as would be said in that tongue,' she said mischievously. 'And I suppose where no limit exists, as in the case of a rich man with a wide taste who wants to do something, it will be better to choose a limit capriciously than to have none.'

'Yes,' he said meditatively. 'I can go as far as that.'

'Well,' resumed Elfride, 'I think it better for a man's nature if he does nothing in particular.'

'There is such a case as being obliged to.'

'Yes, yes; I was speaking of when you are not obliged for any other reason than delight in the prospect of fame. I have thought many times lately that a thin widespread happiness, commencing now, and of a piece with the days of your life, is preferable to an anticipated heap far away in the future, and none now.'

'Why, that's the very thing I said just now as being the principle of

all ephemeral doers like myself.'

'Oh, I am sorry to have parodied you,' she said with some confusion. 'Yes, of course. That is what you meant about not trying to be famous.' And she added, with the quickness of conviction characteristic of her mind: 'There is much littleness in trying to be great. A man must think a good deal of himself, and be conceited enough to believe in himself, before he tries at all.'

'But it is soon enough to say there is harm in a man's thinking a good deal of himself when it is proved he has been thinking wrong, and too soon then sometimes. Besides, we should not conclude that a man who strives earnestly for success does so with a strong sense of his own merit. He may see how little success has to do with merit, and his motive may be his very humility.'

This manner of treating her rather provoked Elfride. No sooner did she agree with him than he ceased to seem to wish it, and took the other side. 'Ah,' she thought inwardly, 'I shall have nothing to do with a man of this kind, though he is our visitor.'

'I think you will find,' resumed Knight, pursuing the conversation more for the sake of finishing off his thoughts on the subject than for engaging her attention, 'that in actual life it is merely a matter of instinct with men--this trying to push on. They awake to a recognition that they have, without premeditation, begun to try a little, and they

say to themselves, "Since I have tried thus much, I will try a little more." They go on because they have begun.'

Elfride, in her turn, was not particularly attending to his words at this moment. She had, unconsciously to herself, a way of seizing any point in the remarks of an interlocutor which interested her, and dwelling upon it, and thinking thoughts of her own thereupon, totally oblivious of all that he might say in continuation. On such occasions she artlessly surveyed the person speaking; and then there was a time for a painter. Her eyes seemed to look at you, and past you, as you were then, into your future; and past your future into your eternity--not reading it, but gazing in an unused, unconscious way--her mind still clinging to its original thought.

This is how she was looking at Knight.

Suddenly Elfride became conscious of what she was doing, and was painfully confused.

'What were you so intent upon in me?' he inquired.

'As far as I was thinking of you at all, I was thinking how clever you are,' she said, with a want of premeditation that was startling in its honesty and simplicity.

Feeling restless now that she had so unwittingly spoken, she arose and

stepped to the window, having heard the voices of her father and Mrs. Swancourt coming up below the terrace. 'Here they are,' she said, going out. Knight walked out upon the lawn behind her. She stood upon the edge of the terrace, close to the stone balustrade, and looked towards the sun, hanging over a glade just now fair as Tempe's vale, up which her father was walking.

Knight could not help looking at her. The sun was within ten degrees of the horizon, and its warm light flooded her face and heightened the bright rose colour of her cheeks to a vermilion red, their moderate pink hue being only seen in its natural tone where the cheek curved round into shadow. The ends of her hanging hair softly dragged themselves backwards and forwards upon her shoulder as each faint breeze thrust against or relinquished it. Fringes and ribbons of her dress, moved by the same breeze, licked like tongues upon the parts around them, and fluttering forward from shady folds caught likewise their share of the lustrous orange glow.

Mr. Swancourt shouted out a welcome to Knight from a distance of about thirty yards, and after a few preliminary words proceeded to a conversation of deep earnestness on Knight's fine old family name, and theories as to lineage and intermarriage connected therewith. Knight's portmanteau having in the meantime arrived, they soon retired to prepare for dinner, which had been postponed two hours later than the usual time of that meal.

An arrival was an event in the life of Elfride, now that they were again in the country, and that of Knight necessarily an engrossing one. And that evening she went to bed for the first time without thinking of Stephen at all.