Chapter XVIII

'He heard her musical pants.'

The old tower of West Endelstow Church had reached the last weeks of its existence. It was to be replaced by a new one from the designs of Mr. Hewby, the architect who had sent down Stephen. Planks and poles had arrived in the churchyard, iron bars had been thrust into the venerable crack extending down the belfry wall to the foundation, the bells had been taken down, the owls had forsaken this home of their forefathers, and six iconoclasts in white fustian, to whom a cracked edifice was a species of Mumbo Jumbo, had taken lodgings in the village previous to beginning the actual removal of the stones.

This was the day after Knight's arrival. To enjoy for the last time the prospect seaward from the summit, the vicar, Mrs. Swancourt, Knight, and Elfride, all ascended the winding turret--Mr. Swancourt stepping forward with many loud breaths, his wife struggling along silently, but suffering none the less. They had hardly reached the top when a large lurid cloud, palpably a reservoir of rain, thunder, and lightning, was seen to be advancing overhead from the north.

The two cautious elders suggested an immediate return, and proceeded to put it in practice as regarded themselves.

'Dear me, I wish I had not come up,' exclaimed Mrs. Swancourt.

'We shall be slower than you two in going down,' the vicar said over his shoulder, 'and so, don't you start till we are nearly at the bottom, or you will run over us and break our necks somewhere in the darkness of the turret.'

Accordingly Elfride and Knight waited on the leads till the staircase should be clear. Knight was not in a talkative mood that morning. Elfride was rather wilful, by reason of his inattention, which she privately set down to his thinking her not worth talking to. Whilst Knight stood watching the rise of the cloud, she sauntered to the other side of the tower, and there remembered a giddy feat she had performed the year before. It was to walk round upon the parapet of the tower--which was quite without battlement or pinnacle, and presented a smooth flat surface about two feet wide, forming a pathway on all the four sides. Without reflecting in the least upon what she was doing she now stepped upon the parapet in the old way, and began walking along.

'We are down, cousin Henry,' cried Mrs. Swancourt up the turret. 'Follow us when you like.'

Knight turned and saw Elfride beginning her elevated promenade. His face flushed with mingled concern and anger at her rashness.

'I certainly gave you credit for more common sense,' he said.

She reddened a little and walked on.

'Miss Swancourt, I insist upon your coming down,' he exclaimed.

'I will in a minute. I am safe enough. I have done it often.'

At that moment, by reason of a slight perturbation his words had caused in her, Elfride's foot caught itself in a little tuft of grass growing in a joint of the stone-work, and she almost lost her balance. Knight sprang forward with a face of horror. By what seemed the special interposition of a considerate Providence she tottered to the inner edge of the parapet instead of to the outer, and reeled over upon the lead roof two or three feet below the wall.

Knight seized her as in a vice, and he said, panting, 'That ever I should have met a woman fool enough to do a thing of that kind! Good God, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!'

The close proximity of the Shadow of Death had made her sick and pale as a corpse before he spoke. Already lowered to that state, his words completely over-powered her, and she swooned away as he held her.

Elfride's eyes were not closed for more than forty seconds. She opened them, and remembered the position instantly. His face had altered its expression from stern anger to pity. But his severe remarks had rather

frightened her, and she struggled to be free.

'If you can stand, of course you may,' he said, and loosened his arms. 'I hardly know whether most to laugh at your freak or to chide you for its folly.'

She immediately sank upon the lead-work. Knight lifted her again. 'Are you hurt?' he said.

She murmured an incoherent expression, and tried to smile; saying, with a fitful aversion of her face, 'I am only frightened. Put me down, do put me down!'

'But you can't walk,' said Knight.

'You don't know that; how can you? I am only frightened, I tell you,' she answered petulantly, and raised her hand to her forehead. Knight then saw that she was bleeding from a severe cut in her wrist, apparently where it had descended upon a salient corner of the lead-work. Elfride, too, seemed to perceive and feel this now for the first time, and for a minute nearly lost consciousness again. Knight rapidly bound his handkerchief round the place, and to add to the complication, the thundercloud he had been watching began to shed some heavy drops of rain. Knight looked up and saw the vicar striding towards the house, and Mrs. Swancourt waddling beside him like a hard-driven duck.

'As you are so faint, it will be much better to let me carry you down,' said Knight; 'or at any rate inside out of the rain.' But her objection to be lifted made it impossible for him to support her for more than five steps.

'This is folly, great folly,' he exclaimed, setting her down.

'Indeed!' she murmured, with tears in her eyes. 'I say I will not be carried, and you say this is folly!'

'So it is.'

'No, it isn't!'

'It is folly, I think. At any rate, the origin of it all is.'

'I don't agree to it. And you needn't get so angry with me; I am not worth it.'

'Indeed you are. You are worth the enmity of princes, as was said of such another. Now, then, will you clasp your hands behind my neck, that I may carry you down without hurting you?'

'No, no.'

'You had better, or I shall foreclose.'

'What's that!'

'Deprive you of your chance.'

Elfride gave a little toss.

'Now, don't writhe so when I attempt to carry you.'

'I can't help it.'

'Then submit quietly.'

'I don't care. I don't care,' she murmured in languid tones and with closed eyes.

He took her into his arms, entered the turret, and with slow and cautious steps descended round and round. Then, with the gentleness of a nursing mother, he attended to the cut on her arm. During his progress through the operations of wiping it and binding it up anew, her face changed its aspect from pained indifference to something like bashful interest, interspersed with small tremors and shudders of a trifling kind.

In the centre of each pale cheek a small red spot the size of a wafer

had now made its appearance, and continued to grow larger. Elfride momentarily expected a recurrence to the lecture on her foolishness, but Knight said no more than this--

'Promise me NEVER to walk on that parapet again.'

'It will be pulled down soon: so I do.' In a few minutes she continued in a lower tone, and seriously, 'You are familiar of course, as everybody is, with those strange sensations we sometimes have, that our life for the moment exists in duplicate.'

'That we have lived through that moment before?'

'Or shall again. Well, I felt on the tower that something similar to that scene is again to be common to us both.'

'God forbid!' said Knight. 'Promise me that you will never again walk on any such place on any consideration.'

'I do.'

'That such a thing has not been before, we know. That it shall not be again, you vow. Therefore think no more of such a foolish fancy.'

There had fallen a great deal of rain, but unaccompanied by lightning. A few minutes longer, and the storm had ceased.

'Now, take my arm, please.'

'Oh no, it is not necessary.' This relapse into wilfulness was because he had again connected the epithet foolish with her.

'Nonsense: it is quite necessary; it will rain again directly, and you are not half recovered.' And without more ado Knight took her hand, drew it under his arm, and held it there so firmly that she could not have removed it without a struggle. Feeling like a colt in a halter for the first time, at thus being led along, yet afraid to be angry, it was to her great relief that she saw the carriage coming round the corner to fetch them.

Her fall upon the roof was necessarily explained to some extent upon their entering the house; but both forbore to mention a word of what she had been doing to cause such an accident. During the remainder of the afternoon Elfride was invisible; but at dinner-time she appeared as bright as ever.

In the drawing-room, after having been exclusively engaged with Mr. and Mrs. Swancourt through the intervening hour, Knight again found himself thrown with Elfride. She had been looking over a chess problem in one of the illustrated periodicals.

'You like chess, Miss Swancourt?'

'Yes. It is my favourite scientific game; indeed, excludes every other. Do you play?'

'I have played; though not lately.'

'Challenge him, Elfride,' said the vicar heartily. 'She plays very well for a lady, Mr. Knight.'

'Shall we play?' asked Elfride tentatively.

'Oh, certainly. I shall be delighted.'

The game began. Mr. Swancourt had forgotten a similar performance with Stephen Smith the year before. Elfride had not; but she had begun to take for her maxim the undoubted truth that the necessity of continuing faithful to Stephen, without suspicion, dictated a fickle behaviour almost as imperatively as fickleness itself; a fact, however, which would give a startling advantage to the latter quality should it ever appear.

Knight, by one of those inexcusable oversights which will sometimes afflict the best of players, placed his rook in the arms of one of her pawns. It was her first advantage. She looked triumphant--even ruthless.

'By George! what was I thinking of?' said Knight quietly; and then

dismissed all concern at his accident.

'Club laws we'll have, won't we, Mr. Knight?' said Elfride suasively.

'Oh yes, certainly,' said Mr. Knight, a thought, however, just occurring to his mind, that he had two or three times allowed her to replace a man on her religiously assuring him that such a move was an absolute blunder.

She immediately took up the unfortunate rook and the contest proceeded, Elfride having now rather the better of the game. Then he won the exchange, regained his position, and began to press her hard. Elfride grew flurried, and placed her queen on his remaining rook's file.

'There--how stupid! Upon my word, I did not see your rook. Of course nobody but a fool would have put a queen there knowingly!'

She spoke excitedly, half expecting her antagonist to give her back the move.

'Nobody, of course,' said Knight serenely, and stretched out his hand towards his royal victim.

'It is not very pleasant to have it taken advantage of, then,' she said with some vexation.

'Club laws, I think you said?' returned Knight blandly, and mercilessly appropriating the queen.

She was on the brink of pouting, but was ashamed to show it; tears almost stood in her eyes. She had been trying so hard--so very hard--thinking and thinking till her brain was in a whirl; and it seemed so heartless of him to treat her so, after all.

'I think it is----' she began.

'What?'

--'Unkind to take advantage of a pure mistake I make in that way.'

'I lost my rook by even a purer mistake,' said the enemy in an inexorable tone, without lifting his eyes.

'Yes, but----' However, as his logic was absolutely unanswerable, she merely registered a protest. 'I cannot endure those cold-blooded ways of clubs and professional players, like Staunton and Morphy. Just as if it really mattered whether you have raised your fingers from a man or no!'

Knight smiled as pitilessly as before, and they went on in silence.

'Checkmate,' said Knight.

'Another game,' said Elfride peremptorily, and looking very warm.

'With all my heart,' said Knight.

'Checkmate,' said Knight again at the end of forty minutes.

'Another game,' she returned resolutely.

'I'll give you the odds of a bishop,' Knight said to her kindly.

'No, thank you,' Elfride replied in a tone intended for courteous indifference; but, as a fact, very cavalier indeed.

'Checkmate,' said her opponent without the least emotion.

Oh, the difference between Elfride's condition of mind now, and when she purposely made blunders that Stephen Smith might win!

It was bedtime. Her mind as distracted as if it would throb itself out of her head, she went off to her chamber, full of mortification at being beaten time after time when she herself was the aggressor. Having for two or three years enjoyed the reputation throughout the globe of her father's brain--which almost constituted her entire world--of being an excellent player, this fiasco was intolerable; for unfortunately the person most dogged in the belief in a false reputation is always that one, the possessor, who has the best means of knowing that it is not

true.

In bed no sleep came to soothe her; that gentle thing being the very middle-of-summer friend in this respect of flying away at the merest troublous cloud. After lying awake till two o'clock an idea seemed to strike her. She softly arose, got a light, and fetched a Chess Praxis from the library. Returning and sitting up in bed, she diligently studied the volume till the clock struck five, and her eyelids felt thick and heavy. She then extinguished the light and lay down again.

'You look pale, Elfride,' said Mrs. Swancourt the next morning at breakfast. 'Isn't she, cousin Harry?'

A young girl who is scarcely ill at all can hardly help becoming so when regarded as such by all eyes turning upon her at the table in obedience to some remark. Everybody looked at Elfride. She certainly was pale.

'Am I pale?' she said with a faint smile. 'I did not sleep much. I could not get rid of armies of bishops and knights, try how I would.'

'Chess is a bad thing just before bedtime; especially for excitable people like yourself, dear. Don't ever play late again.'

'I'll play early instead. Cousin Knight,' she said in imitation of Mrs. Swancourt, 'will you oblige me in something?'

'Even to half my kingdom.'

'Well, it is to play one game more.'

'When?'

'Now, instantly; the moment we have breakfasted.'

'Nonsense, Elfride,' said her father. 'Making yourself a slave to the game like that.'

'But I want to, papa! Honestly, I am restless at having been so ignominiously overcome. And Mr. Knight doesn't mind. So what harm can there be?'

'Let us play, by all means, if you wish it,' said Knight.

So, when breakfast was over, the combatants withdrew to the quiet of the library, and the door was closed. Elfride seemed to have an idea that her conduct was rather ill-regulated and startlingly free from conventional restraint. And worse, she fancied upon Knight's face a slightly amused look at her proceedings.

'You think me foolish, I suppose,' she said recklessly; 'but I want to do my very best just once, and see whether I can overcome you.'

'Certainly: nothing more natural. Though I am afraid it is not the plan adopted by women of the world after a defeat.'

'Why, pray?'

'Because they know that as good as overcoming is skill in effacing recollection of being overcome, and turn their attention to that entirely.'

'I am wrong again, of course.'

'Perhaps your wrong is more pleasing than their right.'

'I don't quite know whether you mean that, or whether you are laughing at me,' she said, looking doubtingly at him, yet inclining to accept the more flattering interpretation. 'I am almost sure you think it vanity in me to think I am a match for you. Well, if you do, I say that vanity is no crime in such a case.'

'Well, perhaps not. Though it is hardly a virtue.'

'Oh yes, in battle! Nelson's bravery lay in his vanity.'

'Indeed! Then so did his death.'

Oh no, no! For it is written in the book of the prophet Shakespeare--

"Fear and be slain? no worse can come to fight;
And fight and die, is death destroying death!"

And down they sat, and the contest began, Elfride having the first move. The game progressed. Elfride's heart beat so violently that she could not sit still. Her dread was lest he should hear it. And he did discover it at last--some flowers upon the table being set throbbing by its pulsations.

'I think we had better give over,' said Knight, looking at her gently. 'It is too much for you, I know. Let us write down the position, and finish another time.'

'No, please not,' she implored. 'I should not rest if I did not know the result at once. It is your move.'

Ten minutes passed.

She started up suddenly. 'I know what you are doing?' she cried, an angry colour upon her cheeks, and her eyes indignant. 'You were thinking of letting me win to please me!'

'I don't mind owning that I was,' Knight responded phlegmatically, and

appearing all the more so by contrast with her own turmoil.

'But you must not! I won't have it.'

'Very well.'

'No, that will not do; I insist that you promise not to do any such absurd thing. It is insulting me!'

'Very well, madam. I won't do any such absurd thing. You shall not win.'

'That is to be proved!' she returned proudly; and the play went on.

Nothing is now heard but the ticking of a quaint old timepiece on the summit of a bookcase. Ten minutes pass; he captures her knight; she takes his knight, and looks a very Rhadamanthus.

More minutes tick away; she takes his pawn and has the advantage, showing her sense of it rather prominently.

Five minutes more: he takes her bishop: she brings things even by taking his knight.

Three minutes: she looks bold, and takes his queen: he looks placid, and takes hers.

Eight or ten minutes pass: he takes a pawn; she utters a little pooh! but not the ghost of a pawn can she take in retaliation.

Ten minutes pass: he takes another pawn and says, 'Check!' She flushes, extricates herself by capturing his bishop, and looks triumphant. He immediately takes her bishop: she looks surprised.

Five minutes longer: she makes a dash and takes his only remaining bishop; he replies by taking her only remaining knight.

Two minutes: he gives check; her mind is now in a painful state of tension, and she shades her face with her hand.

Yet a few minutes more: he takes her rook and checks again. She literally trembles now lest an artful surprise she has in store for him shall be anticipated by the artful surprise he evidently has in store for her.

Five minutes: 'Checkmate in two moves!' exclaims Elfride.

'If you can,' says Knight.

'Oh, I have miscalculated; that is cruel!'

'Checkmate,' says Knight; and the victory is won.

Elfride arose and turned away without letting him see her face. Once in the hall she ran upstairs and into her room, and flung herself down upon her bed, weeping bitterly.

'Where is Elfride?' said her father at luncheon.

Knight listened anxiously for the answer. He had been hoping to see her again before this time.

'She isn't well, sir,' was the reply.

Mrs. Swancourt rose and left the room, going upstairs to Elfride's apartment.

At the door was Unity, who occupied in the new establishment a position between young lady's maid and middle-housemaid.

'She is sound asleep, ma'am,' Unity whispered.

Mrs. Swancourt opened the door. Elfride was lying full-dressed on the bed, her face hot and red, her arms thrown abroad. At intervals of a minute she tossed restlessly from side to side, and indistinctly moaned words used in the game of chess.

Mrs. Swancourt had a turn for doctoring, and felt her pulse. It was

twanging like a harp-string, at the rate of nearly a hundred and fifty a minute. Softly moving the sleeping girl to a little less cramped position, she went downstairs again.

'She is asleep now,' said Mrs. Swancourt. 'She does not seem very well. Cousin Knight, what were you thinking of? her tender brain won't bear cudgelling like your great head. You should have strictly forbidden her to play again.'

In truth, the essayist's experience of the nature of young women was far less extensive than his abstract knowledge of them led himself and others to believe. He could pack them into sentences like a workman, but practically was nowhere.

'I am indeed sorry,' said Knight, feeling even more than he expressed. 'But surely, the young lady knows best what is good for her!'

'Bless you, that's just what she doesn't know. She never thinks of such things, does she, Christopher? Her father and I have to command her and keep her in order, as you would a child. She will say things worthy of a French epigrammatist, and act like a robin in a greenhouse. But I think we will send for Dr. Granson--there can be no harm.'

A man was straightway despatched on horseback to Castle Boterel, and the gentleman known as Dr. Granson came in the course of the afternoon. He pronounced her nervous system to be in a decided state of disorder;

forwarded some soothing draught, and gave orders that on no account whatever was she to play chess again.

The next morning Knight, much vexed with himself, waited with a curiously compounded feeling for her entry to breakfast. The women servants came in to prayers at irregular intervals, and as each entered, he could not, to save his life, avoid turning his head with the hope that she might be Elfride. Mr. Swancourt began reading without waiting for her. Then somebody glided in noiselessly; Knight softly glanced up: it was only the little kitchen-maid. Knight thought reading prayers a bore.

He went out alone, and for almost the first time failed to recognize that holding converse with Nature's charms was not solitude. On nearing the house again he perceived his young friend crossing a slope by a path which ran into the one he was following in the angle of the field. Here they met. Elfride was at once exultant and abashed: coming into his presence had upon her the effect of entering a cathedral.

Knight had his note-book in his hand, and had, in fact, been in the very act of writing therein when they came in view of each other. He left off in the midst of a sentence, and proceeded to inquire warmly concerning her state of health. She said she was perfectly well, and indeed had never looked better. Her health was as inconsequent as her actions. Her lips were red, WITHOUT the polish that cherries have, and their redness margined with the white skin in a clearly defined line, which had

nothing of jagged confusion in it. Altogether she stood as the last person in the world to be knocked over by a game of chess, because too ephemeral-looking to play one.

'Are you taking notes?' she inquired with an alacrity plainly arising less from interest in the subject than from a wish to divert his thoughts from herself.

'Yes; I was making an entry. And with your permission I will complete it.' Knight then stood still and wrote. Elfride remained beside him a moment, and afterwards walked on.

'I should like to see all the secrets that are in that book,' she gaily flung back to him over her shoulder.

'I don't think you would find much to interest you.'

'I know I should.'

'Then of course I have no more to say.'

'But I would ask this question first. Is it a book of mere facts concerning journeys and expenditure, and so on, or a book of thoughts?'

'Well, to tell the truth, it is not exactly either. It consists for the most part of jottings for articles and essays, disjointed and

disconnected, of no possible interest to anybody but myself.'

'It contains, I suppose, your developed thoughts in embryo?'

'Yes.'

'If they are interesting when enlarged to the size of an article, what must they be in their concentrated form? Pure rectified spirit, above proof; before it is lowered to be fit for human consumption: "words that burn" indeed.'

'Rather like a balloon before it is inflated: flabby, shapeless, dead. You could hardly read them.'

'May I try?' she said coaxingly. 'I wrote my poor romance in that way--I mean in bits, out of doors--and I should like to see whether your way of entering things is the same as mine.'

'Really, that's rather an awkward request. I suppose I can hardly refuse now you have asked so directly; but----'

'You think me ill-mannered in asking. But does not this justify me--your writing in my presence, Mr. Knight? If I had lighted upon your book by chance, it would have been different; but you stand before me, and say, "Excuse me," without caring whether I do or not, and write on, and then tell me they are not private facts but public ideas.'

'Very well, Miss Swancourt. If you really must see, the consequences be upon your own head. Remember, my advice to you is to leave my book alone.'

'But with that caution I have your permission?'

'Yes.'

She hesitated a moment, looked at his hand containing the book, then laughed, and saying, 'I must see it,' withdrew it from his fingers.

Knight rambled on towards the house, leaving her standing in the path turning over the leaves. By the time he had reached the wicket-gate he saw that she had moved, and waited till she came up.

Elfride had closed the note-book, and was carrying it disdainfully by the corner between her finger and thumb; her face wore a nettled look. She silently extended the volume towards him, raising her eyes no higher than her hand was lifted.

'Take it,' said Elfride quickly. 'I don't want to read it.'

'Could you understand it?' said Knight.

'As far as I looked. But I didn't care to read much.'

'Why, Miss Swancourt?'

'Only because I didn't wish to--that's all.'

'I warned you that you might not.'

'Yes, but I never supposed you would have put me there.'

'Your name is not mentioned once within the four corners.'

'Not my name--I know that.'

'Nor your description, nor anything by which anybody would recognize you.'

'Except myself. For what is this?' she exclaimed, taking it from him and opening a page. 'August 7. That's the day before yesterday. But I won't read it,' Elfride said, closing the book again with pretty hauteur. 'Why should I? I had no business to ask to see your book, and it serves me right.'

Knight hardly recollected what he had written, and turned over the book to see. He came to this:

'Aug. 7. Girl gets into her teens, and her self-consciousness is born.

After a certain interval passed in infantine helplessness it begins to act. Simple, young, and inexperienced at first. Persons of observation can tell to a nicety how old this consciousness is by the skill it has acquired in the art necessary to its success--the art of hiding itself. Generally begins career by actions which are popularly termed showing-off. Method adopted depends in each case upon the disposition, rank, residence, of the young lady attempting it. Town-bred girl will utter some moral paradox on fast men, or love. Country miss adopts the more material media of taking a ghastly fence, whistling, or making your blood run cold by appearing to risk her neck. (MEM. On Endelstow Tower.)

'An innocent vanity is of course the origin of these displays. "Look at me," say these youthful beginners in womanly artifice, without reflecting whether or not it be to their advantage to show so very much of themselves. (Amplify and correct for paper on Artless Arts.)'

'Yes, I remember now,' said Knight. 'The notes were certainly suggested by your manoeuvre on the church tower. But you must not think too much of such random observations,' he continued encouragingly, as he noticed her injured looks. 'A mere fancy passing through my head assumes a factitious importance to you, because it has been made permanent by being written down. All mankind think thoughts as bad as those of people they most love on earth, but such thoughts never getting embodied on paper, it becomes assumed that they never existed. I daresay that you yourself have thought some disagreeable thing or other of me, which would seem just as bad as this if written. I challenge you, now, to tell

me.'

'The worst thing I have thought of you?'

'Yes.'

'I must not.'

'Oh yes.'

'I thought you were rather round-shouldered.'

Knight looked slightly redder.

'And that there was a little bald spot on the top of your head.'

'Heh-heh! Two ineradicable defects,' said Knight, there being a faint ghastliness discernible in his laugh. 'They are much worse in a lady's eye than being thought self-conscious, I suppose.'

'Ah, that's very fine,' she said, too inexperienced to perceive her hit, and hence not quite disposed to forgive his notes. 'You alluded to me in that entry as if I were such a child, too. Everybody does that. I cannot understand it. I am quite a woman, you know. How old do you think I am?'

'How old? Why, seventeen, I should say. All girls are seventeen.'

'You are wrong. I am nearly nineteen. Which class of women do you like best, those who seem younger, or those who seem older than they are?'

'Off-hand I should be inclined to say those who seem older.'

So it was not Elfride's class.

'But it is well known,' she said eagerly, and there was something touching in the artless anxiety to be thought much of which she revealed by her words, 'that the slower a nature is to develop, the richer the nature. Youths and girls who are men and women before they come of age are nobodies by the time that backward people have shown their full compass.'

'Yes,' said Knight thoughtfully. 'There is really something in that remark. But at the risk of offence I must remind you that you there take it for granted that the woman behind her time at a given age has not reached the end of her tether. Her backwardness may be not because she is slow to develop, but because she soon exhausted her capacity for developing.'

Elfride looked disappointed. By this time they were indoors. Mrs. Swancourt, to whom match-making by any honest means was meat and drink, had now a little scheme of that nature concerning this pair. The morning-room, in which they both expected to find her, was empty; the

old lady having, for the above reason, vacated it by the second door as they entered by the first.

Knight went to the chimney-piece, and carelessly surveyed two portraits on ivory.

'Though these pink ladies had very rudimentary features, judging by what I see here,' he observed, 'they had unquestionably beautiful heads of hair.'

'Yes; and that is everything,' said Elfride, possibly conscious of her own, possibly not.

'Not everything; though a great deal, certainly.'

'Which colour do you like best?' she ventured to ask.

'More depends on its abundance than on its colour.'

'Abundances being equal, may I inquire your favourite colour?'

'Dark.'

'I mean for women,' she said, with the minutest fall of countenance, and a hope that she had been misunderstood.

'So do I,' Knight replied.

It was impossible for any man not to know the colour of Elfride's hair. In women who wear it plainly such a feature may be overlooked by men not given to ocular intentness. But hers was always in the way. You saw her hair as far as you could see her sex, and knew that it was the palest brown. She knew instantly that Knight, being perfectly aware of this, had an independent standard of admiration in the matter.

Elfride was thoroughly vexed. She could not but be struck with the honesty of his opinions, and the worst of it was, that the more they went against her, the more she respected them. And now, like a reckless gambler, she hazarded her last and best treasure. Her eyes: they were her all now.

'What coloured eyes do you like best, Mr. Knight?' she said slowly.

'Honestly, or as a compliment?'

'Of course honestly; I don't want anybody's compliment!'

And yet Elfride knew otherwise: that a compliment or word of approval from that man then would have been like a well to a famished Arab.

'I prefer hazel,' he said serenely.

She had played and lost again.