

Chapter XIX

'Love was in the next degree.'

Knight had none of those light familiarities of speech which, by judicious touches of epigrammatic flattery, obliterate a woman's recollection of the speaker's abstract opinions. So no more was said by either on the subject of hair, eyes, or development. Elfride's mind had been impregnated with sentiments of her own smallness to an uncomfortable degree of distinctness, and her discomfort was visible in her face. The whole tendency of the conversation latterly had been to quietly but surely disparage her; and she was fain to take Stephen into favour in self-defence. He would not have been so unloving, she said, as to admire an idiosyncrasy and features different from her own. True, Stephen had declared he loved her: Mr. Knight had never done anything of the sort. Somehow this did not mend matters, and the sensation of her smallness in Knight's eyes still remained. Had the position been reversed--had Stephen loved her in spite of a differing taste, and had Knight been indifferent in spite of her resemblance to his ideal, it would have engendered far happier thoughts. As matters stood, Stephen's admiration might have its root in a blindness the result of passion. Perhaps any keen man's judgment was condemnatory of her.

During the remainder of Saturday they were more or less thrown with their seniors, and no conversation arose which was exclusively their

own. When Elfride was in bed that night her thoughts recurred to the same subject. At one moment she insisted that it was ill-natured of him to speak so decisively as he had done; the next, that it was sterling honesty.

'Ah, what a poor nobody I am!' she said, sighing. 'People like him, who go about the great world, don't care in the least what I am like either in mood or feature.'

Perhaps a man who has got thoroughly into a woman's mind in this manner,
is half way to her heart; the distance between those two stations is proverbially short.

'And are you really going away this week?' said Mrs. Swancourt to Knight on the following evening, which was Sunday.

They were all leisurely climbing the hill to the church, where a last service was now to be held at the rather exceptional time of evening instead of in the afternoon, previous to the demolition of the ruinous portions.

'I am intending to cross to Cork from Bristol,' returned Knight; 'and then I go on to Dublin.'

'Return this way, and stay a little longer with us,' said the vicar. 'A

week is nothing. We have hardly been able to realize your presence yet.

I remember a story which----'

The vicar suddenly stopped. He had forgotten it was Sunday, and would probably have gone on in his week-day mode of thought had not a turn in the breeze blown the skirt of his college gown within the range of his vision, and so reminded him. He at once diverted the current of his narrative with the dexterity the occasion demanded.

'The story of the Levite who journeyed to Bethlehem-judah, from which I took my text the Sunday before last, is quite to the point,' he continued, with the pronunciation of a man who, far from having intended to tell a week-day story a moment earlier, had thought of nothing but Sabbath matters for several weeks. 'What did he gain after all by his restlessness? Had he remained in the city of the Jebusites, and not been so anxious for Gibeah, none of his troubles would have arisen.'

'But he had wasted five days already,' said Knight, closing his eyes to the vicar's commendable diversion. 'His fault lay in beginning the tarrying system originally.'

'True, true; my illustration fails.'

'But not the hospitality which prompted the story.'

'So you are to come just the same,' urged Mrs. Swancourt, for she had

seen an almost imperceptible fall of countenance in her stepdaughter at Knight's announcement.

Knight half promised to call on his return journey; but the uncertainty with which he spoke was quite enough to fill Elfride with a regretful interest in all he did during the few remaining hours. The curate having already officiated twice that day in the two churches, Mr. Swancourt had undertaken the whole of the evening service, and Knight read the lessons for him. The sun streamed across from the dilapidated west window, and lighted all the assembled worshippers with a golden glow, Knight as he read being illuminated by the same mellow lustre. Elfride at the organ regarded him with a throbbing sadness of mood which was fed by a sense of being far removed from his sphere. As he went deliberately through the chapter appointed--a portion of the history of Elijah--and ascended that magnificent climax of the wind, the earthquake, the fire, and the still small voice, his deep tones echoed past with such apparent disregard of her existence, that his presence inspired her with a forlorn sense of unapproachableness, which his absence would hardly have been able to cause.

At the same time, turning her face for a moment to catch the glory of the dying sun as it fell on his form, her eyes were arrested by the shape and aspect of a woman in the west gallery. It was the bleak barren countenance of the widow Jethway, whom Elfride had not seen much of since the morning of her return with Stephen Smith. Possessing the smallest of competencies, this unhappy woman appeared to spend her life

in journeyings between Endelstow Churchyard and that of a village near Southampton, where her father and mother were laid.

She had not attended the service here for a considerable time, and she now seemed to have a reason for her choice of seat. From the gallery window the tomb of her son was plainly visible--standing as the nearest object in a prospect which was closed outwardly by the changeless horizon of the sea.

The streaming rays, too, flooded her face, now bent towards Elfride with a hard and bitter expression that the solemnity of the place raised to a tragic dignity it did not intrinsically possess. The girl resumed her normal attitude with an added disquiet.

Elfride's emotion was cumulative, and after a while would assert itself on a sudden. A slight touch was enough to set it free--a poem, a sunset, a cunningly contrived chord of music, a vague imagining, being the usual accidents of its exhibition. The longing for Knight's respect, which was leading up to an incipient yearning for his love, made the present conjuncture a sufficient one. Whilst kneeling down previous to leaving, when the sunny streaks had gone upward to the roof, and the lower part of the church was in soft shadow, she could not help thinking of Coleridge's morbid poem 'The Three Graves,' and shuddering as she wondered if Mrs. Jethway were cursing her, she wept as if her heart would break.

They came out of church just as the sun went down, leaving the landscape like a platform from which an eloquent speaker has retired, and nothing remains for the audience to do but to rise and go home. Mr. and Mrs. Swancourt went off in the carriage, Knight and Elfride preferring to walk, as the skilful old matchmaker had imagined. They descended the hill together.

'I liked your reading, Mr. Knight,' Elfride presently found herself saying. 'You read better than papa.'

'I will praise anybody that will praise me. You played excellently, Miss Swancourt, and very correctly.'

'Correctly--yes.'

'It must be a great pleasure to you to take an active part in the service.'

'I want to be able to play with more feeling. But I have not a good selection of music, sacred or secular. I wish I had a nice little music-library--well chosen, and that the only new pieces sent me were those of genuine merit.'

'I am glad to hear such a wish from you. It is extraordinary how many women have no honest love of music as an end and not as a means, even leaving out those who have nothing in them. They mostly like it for its

accessories. I have never met a woman who loves music as do ten or a dozen men I know.'

'How would you draw the line between women with something and women with nothing in them?'

'Well,' said Knight, reflecting a moment, 'I mean by nothing in them those who don't care about anything solid. This is an instance: I knew a man who had a young friend in whom he was much interested; in fact, they were going to be married. She was seemingly poetical, and he offered her a choice of two editions of the British poets, which she pretended to want badly. He said, "Which of them would you like best for me to send?" She said, "A pair of the prettiest earrings in Bond Street, if you don't mind, would be nicer than either." Now I call her a girl with not much in her but vanity; and so do you, I daresay.'

'Oh yes,' replied Elfride with an effort.

Happening to catch a glimpse of her face as she was speaking, and noticing that her attempt at heartiness was a miserable failure, he appeared to have misgivings.

'You, Miss Swancourt, would not, under such circumstances, have preferred the nicknacks?'

'No, I don't think I should, indeed,' she stammered.

'I'll put it to you,' said the inflexible Knight. 'Which will you have of these two things of about equal value--the well-chosen little library of the best music you spoke of--bound in morocco, walnut case, lock and key--or a pair of the very prettiest earrings in Bond Street windows?'

'Of course the music,' Elfride replied with forced earnestness.

'You are quite certain?' he said emphatically.

'Quite,' she faltered; 'if I could for certain buy the earrings afterwards.'

Knight, somewhat blamably, keenly enjoyed sparring with the palpitating mobile creature, whose excitable nature made any such thing a species of cruelty.

He looked at her rather oddly, and said, 'Fie!'

'Forgive me,' she said, laughing a little, a little frightened, and blushing very deeply.

'Ah, Miss Elfie, why didn't you say at first, as any firm woman would have said, I am as bad as she, and shall choose the same?'

'I don't know,' said Elfride wofully, and with a distressful smile.

'I thought you were exceptionally musical?'

'So I am, I think. But the test is so severe--quite painful.'

'I don't understand.'

'Music doesn't do any real good, or rather----'

'That IS a thing to say, Miss Swancourt! Why, what----'

'You don't understand! you don't understand!'

'Why, what conceivable use is there in jimcrack jewellery?'

'No, no, no, no!' she cried petulantly; 'I didn't mean what you think. I like the music best, only I like----'

'Earrings better--own it!' he said in a teasing tone. 'Well, I think I should have had the moral courage to own it at once, without pretending to an elevation I could not reach.'

Like the French soldiery, Elfride was not brave when on the defensive. So it was almost with tears in her eyes that she answered desperately:

'My meaning is, that I like earrings best just now, because I lost one of my prettiest pair last year, and papa said he would not buy any more, or allow me to myself, because I was careless; and now I wish I had some like them--that's what my meaning is--indeed it is, Mr. Knight.'

'I am afraid I have been very harsh and rude,' said Knight, with a look of regret at seeing how disturbed she was. 'But seriously, if women only knew how they ruin their good looks by such appurtenances, I am sure they would never want them.'

'They were lovely, and became me so!'

'Not if they were like the ordinary hideous things women stuff their ears with nowadays--like the governor of a steam-engine, or a pair of scales, or gold gibbets and chains, and artists' palettes, and compensation pendulums, and Heaven knows what besides.'

'No; they were not one of those things. So pretty--like this,' she said with eager animation. And she drew with the point of her parasol an enlarged view of one of the lamented darlings, to a scale that would have suited a giantess half-a-mile high.

'Yes, very pretty--very,' said Knight dryly. 'How did you come to lose such a precious pair of articles?'

'I only lost one--nobody ever loses both at the same time.'

She made this remark with embarrassment, and a nervous movement of the fingers. Seeing that the loss occurred whilst Stephen Smith was attempting to kiss her for the first time on the cliff, her confusion was hardly to be wondered at. The question had been awkward, and received no direct answer.

Knight seemed not to notice her manner.

'Oh, nobody ever loses both--I see. And certainly the fact that it was a case of loss takes away all odour of vanity from your choice.'

'As I never know whether you are in earnest, I don't now,' she said, looking up inquiringly at the hairy face of the oracle. And coming gallantly to her own rescue, 'If I really seem vain, it is that I am only vain in my ways--not in my heart. The worst women are those vain in their hearts, and not in their ways.'

'An adroit distinction. Well, they are certainly the more objectionable of the two,' said Knight.

'Is vanity a mortal or a venial sin? You know what life is: tell me.'

'I am very far from knowing what life is. A just conception of life is too large a thing to grasp during the short interval of passing through it.'

'Will the fact of a woman being fond of jewellery be likely to make her life, in its higher sense, a failure?'

'Nobody's life is altogether a failure.'

'Well, you know what I mean, even though my words are badly selected and commonplace,' she said impatiently. 'Because I utter commonplace words, you must not suppose I think only commonplace thoughts. My poor stock of words are like a limited number of rough moulds I have to cast all my materials in, good and bad; and the novelty or delicacy of the substance is often lost in the coarse triteness of the form.'

'Very well; I'll believe that ingenious representation. As to the subject in hand--lives which are failures--you need not trouble yourself. Anybody's life may be just as romantic and strange and interesting if he or she fails as if he or she succeed. All the difference is, that the last chapter is wanting in the story. If a man of power tries to do a great deed, and just falls short of it by an accident not his fault, up to that time his history had as much in it as that of a great man who has done his great deed. It is whimsical of the world to hold that particulars of how a lad went to school and so on should be as an interesting romance or as nothing to them, precisely in proportion to his after renown.'

They were walking between the sunset and the moonrise. With the dropping

of the sun a nearly full moon had begun to raise itself. Their shadows, as cast by the western glare, showed signs of becoming obliterated in the interest of a rival pair in the opposite direction which the moon was bringing to distinctness.

'I consider my life to some extent a failure,' said Knight again after a pause, during which he had noticed the antagonistic shadows.

'You! How?'

'I don't precisely know. But in some way I have missed the mark.'

'Really? To have done it is not much to be sad about, but to feel that you have done it must be a cause of sorrow. Am I right?'

'Partly, though not quite. For a sensation of being profoundly experienced serves as a sort of consolation to people who are conscious of having taken wrong turnings. Contradictory as it seems, there is nothing truer than that people who have always gone right don't know half as much about the nature and ways of going right as those do who have gone wrong. However, it is not desirable for me to chill your summer-time by going into this.'

'You have not told me even now if I am really vain.'

'If I say Yes, I shall offend you; if I say No, you'll think I don't

mean it,' he replied, looking curiously into her face.

'Ah, well,' she replied, with a little breath of distress, "'That which is exceeding deep, who will find it out?" I suppose I must take you as I do the Bible--find out and understand all I can; and on the strength of that, swallow the rest in a lump, by simple faith. Think me vain, if you will. Worldly greatness requires so much littleness to grow up in, that an infirmity more or less is not a matter for regret.'

'As regards women, I can't say,' answered Knight carelessly; 'but it is without doubt a misfortune for a man who has a living to get, to be born of a truly noble nature. A high soul will bring a man to the workhouse; so you may be right in sticking up for vanity.'

'No, no, I don't do that,' she said regretfully.

Mr. Knight, when you are gone, will you send me something you have written? I think I should like to see whether you write as you have lately spoken, or in your better mood. Which is your true self--the cynic you have been this evening, or the nice philosopher you were up to to-night?'

'Ah, which? You know as well as I.'

Their conversation detained them on the lawn and in the portico till the stars blinked out. Elfride flung back her head, and said idly--

'There's a bright star exactly over me.'

'Each bright star is overhead somewhere.'

'Is it? Oh yes, of course. Where is that one?' and she pointed with her finger.

'That is poised like a white hawk over one of the Cape Verde Islands.'

'And that?'

'Looking down upon the source of the Nile.'

'And that lonely quiet-looking one?'

'He watches the North Pole, and has no less than the whole equator for his horizon. And that idle one low down upon the ground, that we have almost rolled away from, is in India--over the head of a young friend of mine, who very possibly looks at the star in our zenith, as it hangs low upon his horizon, and thinks of it as marking where his true love dwells.'

Elfride glanced at Knight with misgiving. Did he mean her? She could not see his features; but his attitude seemed to show unconsciousness.

'The star is over MY head,' she said with hesitation.

'Or anybody else's in England.'

'Oh yes, I see:' she breathed her relief.

'His parents, I believe, are natives of this county. I don't know them, though I have been in correspondence with him for many years till lately. Fortunately or unfortunately for him he fell in love, and then went to Bombay. Since that time I have heard very little of him.'

Knight went no further in his volunteered statement, and though Elfride at one moment was inclined to profit by the lessons in honesty he had just been giving her, the flesh was weak, and the intention dispersed into silence. There seemed a reproach in Knight's blind words, and yet she was not able to clearly define any disloyalty that she had been guilty of.