Chapter XX

'A distant dearness in the hill.'

Knight turned his back upon the parish of Endelstow, and crossed over to Cork.

One day of absence superimposed itself on another, and proportionately weighted his heart. He pushed on to the Lakes of Killarney, rambled amid their luxuriant woods, surveyed the infinite variety of island, hill, and dale there to be found, listened to the marvellous echoes of that romantic spot; but altogether missed the glory and the dream he formerly found in such favoured regions.

Whilst in the company of Elfride, her girlish presence had not perceptibly affected him to any depth. He had not been conscious that her entry into his sphere had added anything to himself; but now that she was taken away he was very conscious of a great deal being abstracted. The superfluity had become a necessity, and Knight was in love.

Stephen fell in love with Elfride by looking at her: Knight by ceasing to do so. When or how the spirit entered into him he knew not: certain he was that when on the point of leaving Endelstow he had felt none of that exquisite nicety of poignant sadness natural to such severances,

seeing how delightful a subject of contemplation Elfride had been ever since. Had he begun to love her when she met his eye after her mishap on the tower? He had simply thought her weak. Had he grown to love her whilst standing on the lawn brightened all over by the evening sun? He had thought her complexion good: no more. Was it her conversation that had sown the seed? He had thought her words ingenious, and very creditable to a young woman, but not noteworthy. Had the chess-playing anything to do with it? Certainly not: he had thought her at that time a rather conceited child.

Knight's experience was a complete disproof of the assumption that love always comes by glances of the eye and sympathetic touches of the fingers: that, like flame, it makes itself palpable at the moment of generation. Not till they were parted, and she had become sublimated in his memory, could he be said to have even attentively regarded her.

Thus, having passively gathered up images of her which his mind did not act upon till the cause of them was no longer before him, he appeared to himself to have fallen in love with her soul, which had temporarily assumed its disembodiment to accompany him on his way.

She began to rule him so imperiously now that, accustomed to analysis, he almost trembled at the possible result of the introduction of this new force among the nicely adjusted ones of his ordinary life. He became restless: then he forgot all collateral subjects in the pleasure of thinking about her.

Yet it must be said that Knight loved philosophically rather than with romance.

He thought of her manner towards him. Simplicity verges on coquetry. Was she flirting? he said to himself. No forcible translation of favour into suspicion was able to uphold such a theory. The performance had been too well done to be anything but real. It had the defects without which nothing is genuine. No actress of twenty years' standing, no bald-necked lady whose earliest season 'out' was lost in the discreet mist of evasive talk, could have played before him the part of ingenuous girl as Elfride lived it. She had the little artful ways which partly make up ingenuousness.

There are bachelors by nature and bachelors by circumstance: spinsters there doubtless are also of both kinds, though some think only those of the latter. However, Knight had been looked upon as a bachelor by nature. What was he coming to? It was very odd to himself to look at his theories on the subject of love, and reading them now by the full light of a new experience, to see how much more his sentences meant than he had felt them to mean when they were written. People often discover the real force of a trite old maxim only when it is thrust upon them by a chance adventure; but Knight had never before known the case of a man who learnt the full compass of his own epigrams by such means.

He was intensely satisfied with one aspect of the affair. Inbred in him

was an invincible objection to be any but the first comer in a woman's heart. He had discovered within himself the condition that if ever he did make up his mind to marry, it must be on the certainty that no cropping out of inconvenient old letters, no bow and blush to a mysterious stranger casually met, should be a possible source of discomposure. Knight's sentiments were only the ordinary ones of a man of his age who loves genuinely, perhaps exaggerated a little by his pursuits. When men first love as lads, it is with the very centre of their hearts, nothing else being concerned in the operation. With added years, more of the faculties attempt a partnership in the passion, till at Knight's age the understanding is fain to have a hand in it. It may as well be left out. A man in love setting up his brains as a gauge of his position is as one determining a ship's longitude from a light at the mast-head.

Knight argued from Elfride's unwontedness of manner, which was matter of fact, to an unwontedness in love, which was matter of inference only. Incredules les plus credules. 'Elfride,' he said, 'had hardly looked upon a man till she saw me.'

He had never forgotten his severity to her because she preferred ornament to edification, and had since excused her a hundred times by thinking how natural to womankind was a love of adornment, and how necessary became a mild infusion of personal vanity to complete the delicate and fascinating dye of the feminine mind. So at the end of the week's absence, which had brought him as far as Dublin, he resolved to

curtail his tour, return to Endelstow, and commit himself by making a reality of the hypothetical offer of that Sunday evening.

Notwithstanding that he had concocted a great deal of paper theory on social amenities and modern manners generally, the special ounce of practice was wanting, and now for his life Knight could not recollect whether it was considered correct to give a young lady personal ornaments before a regular engagement to marry had been initiated. But the day before leaving Dublin he looked around anxiously for a high-class jewellery establishment, in which he purchased what he considered would suit her best.

It was with a most awkward and unwonted feeling that after entering and closing the door of his room he sat down, opened the morocco case, and held up each of the fragile bits of gold-work before his eyes. Many things had become old to the solitary man of letters, but these were new, and he handled like a child an outcome of civilization which had never before been touched by his fingers. A sudden fastidious decision that the pattern chosen would not suit her after all caused him to rise in a flurry and tear down the street to change them for others. After a great deal of trouble in reselecting, during which his mind became so bewildered that the critical faculty on objects of art seemed to have vacated his person altogether, Knight carried off another pair of ear-rings. These remained in his possession till the afternoon, when, after contemplating them fifty times with a growing misgiving that the last choice was worse than the first, he felt that no sleep would visit

his pillow till he had improved upon his previous purchases yet again. In a perfect heat of vexation with himself for such tergiversation, he went anew to the shop-door, was absolutely ashamed to enter and give further trouble, went to another shop, bought a pair at an enormously increased price, because they seemed the very thing, asked the goldsmiths if they would take the other pair in exchange, was told that they could not exchange articles bought of another maker, paid down the money, and went off with the two pairs in his possession, wondering what on earth to do with the superfluous pair. He almost wished he could lose them, or that somebody would steal them, and was burdened with an interposing sense that, as a capable man, with true ideas of economy, he must necessarily sell them somewhere, which he did at last for a mere song. Mingled with a blank feeling of a whole day being lost to him in running about the city on this new and extraordinary class of errand, and of several pounds being lost through his bungling, was a slight sense of satisfaction that he had emerged for ever from his antediluvian ignorance on the subject of ladies' jewellery, as well as secured a truly artistic production at last. During the remainder of that day he scanned the ornaments of every lady he met with the profoundly experienced eye of an appraiser.

Next morning Knight was again crossing St. George's Channel--not returning to London by the Holyhead route as he had originally intended, but towards Bristol--availing himself of Mr. and Mrs. Swancourt's invitation to revisit them on his homeward journey.

We flit forward to Elfride.

Woman's ruling passion--to fascinate and influence those more powerful than she--though operant in Elfride, was decidedly purposeless. She had wanted her friend Knight's good opinion from the first: how much more than that elementary ingredient of friendship she now desired, her fears would hardly allow her to think. In originally wishing to please the highest class of man she had ever intimately known, there was no disloyalty to Stephen Smith. She could not--and few women can--realize the possible vastness of an issue which has only an insignificant begetting.

Her letters from Stephen were necessarily few, and her sense of fidelity clung to the last she had received as a wrecked mariner clings to flotsam. The young girl persuaded herself that she was glad Stephen had such a right to her hand as he had acquired (in her eyes) by the elopement. She beguiled herself by saying, 'Perhaps if I had not so committed myself I might fall in love with Mr. Knight.'

All this made the week of Knight's absence very gloomy and distasteful to her. She retained Stephen in her prayers, and his old letters were re-read--as a medicine in reality, though she deceived herself into the belief that it was as a pleasure.

These letters had grown more and more hopeful. He told her that he finished his work every day with a pleasant consciousness of having

removed one more stone from the barrier which divided them. Then he drew images of what a fine figure they two would cut some day. People would turn their heads and say, 'What a prize he has won!' She was not to be sad about that wild runaway attempt of theirs (Elfride had repeatedly said that it grieved her). Whatever any other person who knew of it might think, he knew well enough the modesty of her nature. The only reproach was a gentle one for not having written quite so devotedly during her visit to London. Her letter had seemed to have a liveliness derived from other thoughts than thoughts of him.

Knight's intention of an early return to Endelstow having originally been faint, his promise to do so had been fainter. He was a man who kept his words well to the rear of his possible actions. The vicar was rather surprised to see him again so soon: Mrs. Swancourt was not. Knight found, on meeting them all, after his arrival had been announced, that they had formed an intention to go to St. Leonards for a few days at the end of the month.

No satisfactory conjuncture offered itself on this first evening of his return for presenting Elfride with what he had been at such pains to procure. He was fastidious in his reading of opportunities for such an intended act. The next morning chancing to break fine after a week of cloudy weather, it was proposed and decided that they should all drive to Barwith Strand, a local lion which neither Mrs. Swancourt nor Knight had seen. Knight scented romantic occasions from afar, and foresaw that

such a one might be expected before the coming night.

The journey was along a road by neutral green hills, upon which hedgerows lay trailing like ropes on a quay. Gaps in these uplands revealed the blue sea, flecked with a few dashes of white and a solitary white sail, the whole brimming up to a keen horizon which lay like a line ruled from hillside to hillside. Then they rolled down a pass, the chocolate-toned rocks forming a wall on both sides, from one of which fell a heavy jagged shade over half the roadway. A spout of fresh water burst from an occasional crevice, and pattering down upon broad green leaves, ran along as a rivulet at the bottom. Unkempt locks of heather overhung the brow of each steep, whence at divers points a bramble swung forth into mid-air, snatching at their head-dresses like a claw.

They mounted the last crest, and the bay which was to be the end of their pilgrimage burst upon them. The ocean blueness deepened its colour as it stretched to the foot of the crags, where it terminated in a fringe of white--silent at this distance, though moving and heaving like a counterpane upon a restless sleeper. The shadowed hollows of the purple and brown rocks would have been called blue had not that tint been so entirely appropriated by the water beside them.

The carriage was put up at a little cottage with a shed attached, and an ostler and the coachman carried the hamper of provisions down to the shore.

Knight found his opportunity. 'I did not forget your wish,' he began, when they were apart from their friends.

Elfride looked as if she did not understand.

'And I have brought you these,' he continued, awkwardly pulling out the case, and opening it while holding it towards her.

'O Mr. Knight!' said Elfride confusedly, and turning to a lively red; 'I didn't know you had any intention or meaning in what you said. I thought it a mere supposition. I don't want them.'

A thought which had flashed into her mind gave the reply a greater decisiveness than it might otherwise have possessed. To-morrow was the day for Stephen's letter.

'But will you not accept them?' Knight returned, feeling less her master than heretofore.

'I would rather not. They are beautiful--more beautiful than any I have ever seen,' she answered earnestly, looking half-wishfully at the temptation, as Eve may have looked at the apple. 'But I don't want to have them, if you will kindly forgive me, Mr. Knight.'

'No kindness at all,' said Mr. Knight, brought to a full stop at this unexpected turn of events.

A silence followed. Knight held the open case, looking rather wofully at the glittering forms he had forsaken his orbit to procure; turning it about and holding it up as if, feeling his gift to be slighted by her, he were endeavouring to admire it very much himself.

'Shut them up, and don't let me see them any longer--do!' she said laughingly, and with a quaint mixture of reluctance and entreaty.

'Why, Elfie?'

'Not Elfie to you, Mr. Knight. Oh, because I shall want them. There, I am silly, I know, to say that! But I have a reason for not taking them--now.' She kept in the last word for a moment, intending to imply that her refusal was finite, but somehow the word slipped out, and undid all the rest.

'You will take them some day?'

'I don't want to.'

'Why don't you want to, Elfride Swancourt?'

'Because I don't. I don't like to take them.'

'I have read a fact of distressing significance in that,' said Knight.

'Since you like them, your dislike to having them must be towards me?'

'No, it isn't.'

'What, then? Do you like me?'

Elfride deepened in tint, and looked into the distance with features shaped to an expression of the nicest criticism as regarded her answer.

'I like you pretty well,' she at length murmured mildly.

'Not very much?'

'You are so sharp with me, and say hard things, and so how can I?' she replied evasively.

'You think me a fogey, I suppose?'

'No, I don't--I mean I do--I don't know what I think you, I mean. Let us go to papa,' responded Elfride, with somewhat of a flurried delivery.

'Well, I'll tell you my object in getting the present,' said Knight, with a composure intended to remove from her mind any possible impression of his being what he was--her lover. 'You see it was the very least I could do in common civility.'

Elfride felt rather blank at this lucid statement.

Knight continued, putting away the case: 'I felt as anybody naturally would have, you know, that my words on your choice the other day were invidious and unfair, and thought an apology should take a practical shape.'

'Oh yes.'

Elfride was sorry--she could not tell why--that he gave such a legitimate reason. It was a disappointment that he had all the time a cool motive, which might be stated to anybody without raising a smile. Had she known they were offered in that spirit, she would certainly have accepted the seductive gift. And the tantalizing feature was that perhaps he suspected her to imagine them offered as a lover's token, which was mortifying enough if they were not.

Mrs. Swancourt came now to where they were sitting, to select a flat boulder for spreading their table-cloth upon, and, amid the discussion on that subject, the matter pending between Knight and Elfride was shelved for a while. He read her refusal so certainly as the bashfulness of a girl in a novel position, that, upon the whole, he could tolerate such a beginning. Could Knight have been told that it was a sense of fidelity struggling against new love, whilst no less assuring as to his ultimate victory, it might have entirely abstracted the wish to secure it.

At the same time a slight constraint of manner was visible between them for the remainder of the afternoon. The tide turned, and they were obliged to ascend to higher ground. The day glided on to its end with the usual quiet dreamy passivity of such occasions--when every deed done and thing thought is in endeavouring to avoid doing and thinking more. Looking idly over the verge of a crag, they beheld their stone dining-table gradually being splashed upon and their crumbs and fragments all washed away by the incoming sea. The vicar drew a moral lesson from the scene; Knight replied in the same satisfied strain. And then the waves rolled in furiously--the neutral green-and-blue tongues of water slid up the slopes, and were metamorphosed into foam by a careless blow, falling back white and faint, and leaving trailing followers behind.

The passing of a heavy shower was the next scene--driving them to shelter in a shallow cave--after which the horses were put in, and they started to return homeward. By the time they reached the higher levels the sky had again cleared, and the sunset rays glanced directly upon the wet uphill road they had climbed. The ruts formed by their carriage-wheels on the ascent--a pair of Liliputian canals--were as shining bars of gold, tapering to nothing in the distance. Upon this also they turned their backs, and night spread over the sea.

The evening was chilly, and there was no moon. Knight sat close to Elfride, and, when the darkness rendered the position of a person a

matter of uncertainty, particularly close. Elfride edged away.

'I hope you allow me my place ungrudgingly?' he whispered.

'Oh yes; 'tis the least I can do in common civility,' she said,
accenting the words so that he might recognize them as his own returned.

Both of them felt delicately balanced between two possibilities. Thus
they reached home.

To Knight this mild experience was delightful. It was to him a gentle innocent time--a time which, though there may not be much in it, seldom repeats itself in a man's life, and has a peculiar dearness when glanced at retrospectively. He is not inconveniently deep in love, and is lulled by a peaceful sense of being able to enjoy the most trivial thing with a childlike enjoyment. The movement of a wave, the colour of a stone, anything, was enough for Knight's drowsy thoughts of that day to precipitate themselves upon. Even the sermonizing platitudes the vicar had delivered himself of--chiefly because something seemed to be professionally required of him in the presence of a man of Knight's proclivities--were swallowed whole. The presence of Elfride led him not merely to tolerate that kind of talk from the necessities of ordinary courtesy; but he listened to it--took in the ideas with an enjoyable make-believe that they were proper and necessary, and indulged in a conservative feeling that the face of things was complete.

Entering her room that evening Elfride found a packet for herself on the dressing-table. How it came there she did not know. She tremblingly undid the folds of white paper that covered it. Yes; it was the treasure of a morocco case, containing those treasures of ornament she had refused in the daytime.

Elfride dressed herself in them for a moment, looked at herself in the glass, blushed red, and put them away. They filled her dreams all that night. Never had she seen anything so lovely, and never was it more clear that as an honest woman she was in duty bound to refuse them. Why it was not equally clear to her that duty required more vigorous co-ordinate conduct as well, let those who dissect her say.

The next morning glared in like a spectre upon her. It was Stephen's letter-day, and she was bound to meet the postman--to stealthily do a deed she had never liked, to secure an end she now had ceased to desire.

But she went.

There were two letters.

One was from the bank at St. Launce's, in which she had a small private deposit--probably something about interest. She put that in her pocket for a moment, and going indoors and upstairs to be safer from observation, tremblingly opened Stephen's.

What was this he said to her?

She was to go to the St. Launce's Bank and take a sum of money which they had received private advices to pay her.

The sum was two hundred pounds.

There was no check, order, or anything of the nature of guarantee. In fact the information amounted to this: the money was now in the St. Launce's Bank, standing in her name.

She instantly opened the other letter. It contained a deposit-note from the bank for the sum of two hundred pounds which had that day been added to her account. Stephen's information, then, was correct, and the transfer made.

'I have saved this in one year,' Stephen's letter went on to say, 'and what so proper as well as pleasant for me to do as to hand it over to you to keep for your use? I have plenty for myself, independently of this. Should you not be disposed to let it lie idle in the bank, get your father to invest it in your name on good security. It is a little present to you from your more than betrothed. He will, I think, Elfride, feel now that my pretensions to your hand are anything but the dream of a silly boy not worth rational consideration.'

With a natural delicacy, Elfride, in mentioning her father's marriage,

had refrained from all allusion to the pecuniary resources of the lady.

Leaving this matter-of-fact subject, he went on, somewhat after his boyish manner:

'Do you remember, darling, that first morning of my arrival at your house, when your father read at prayers the miracle of healing the sick of the palsy--where he is told to take up his bed and walk? I do, and I can now so well realize the force of that passage. The smallest piece of mat is the bed of the Oriental, and yesterday I saw a native perform the very action, which reminded me to mention it. But you are better read than I, and perhaps you knew all this long ago....One day I bought some small native idols to send home to you as curiosities, but afterwards finding they had been cast in England, made to look old, and shipped over, I threw them away in disgust.

'Speaking of this reminds me that we are obliged to import all our house-building ironwork from England. Never was such foresight required to be exercised in building houses as here. Before we begin, we have to order every column, lock, hinge, and screw that will be required. We cannot go into the next street, as in London, and get them cast at a minute's notice. Mr. L. says somebody will have to go to England very soon and superintend the selection of a large order of this kind. I only wish I may be the man.'

There before her lay the deposit-receipt for the two hundred pounds,

and beside it the elegant present of Knight. Elfride grew cold--then her cheeks felt heated by beating blood. If by destroying the piece of paper the whole transaction could have been withdrawn from her experience, she would willingly have sacrificed the money it represented. She did not know what to do in either case. She almost feared to let the two articles lie in juxtaposition: so antagonistic were the interests they represented that a miraculous repulsion of one by the other was almost to be expected.

That day she was seen little of. By the evening she had come to a resolution, and acted upon it. The packet was sealed up--with a tear of regret as she closed the case upon the pretty forms it contained--directed, and placed upon the writing-table in Knight's room. And a letter was written to Stephen, stating that as yet she hardly understood her position with regard to the money sent; but declaring that she was ready to fulfil her promise to marry him. After this letter had been written she delayed posting it--although never ceasing to feel strenuously that the deed must be done.

Several days passed. There was another Indian letter for Elfride. Coming unexpectedly, her father saw it, but made no remark--why, she could not tell. The news this time was absolutely overwhelming. Stephen, as he had wished, had been actually chosen as the most fitting to execute the iron-work commission he had alluded to as impending. This duty completed he would have three months' leave. His letter continued that he should follow it in a week, and should take the opportunity to plainly ask

her father to permit the engagement. Then came a page expressive of his delight and hers at the reunion; and finally, the information that he would write to the shipping agents, asking them to telegraph and tell her when the ship bringing him home should be in sight--knowing how acceptable such information would be.

Elfride lived and moved now as in a dream. Knight had at first become almost angry at her persistent refusal of his offering--and no less with the manner than the fact of it. But he saw that she began to look worn and ill--and his vexation lessened to simple perplexity.

He ceased now to remain in the house for long hours together as before, but made it a mere centre for antiquarian and geological excursions in the neighbourhood. Throw up his cards and go away he fain would have done, but could not. And, thus, availing himself of the privileges of a relative, he went in and out the premises as fancy led him--but still lingered on.

'I don't wish to stay here another day if my presence is distasteful,' he said one afternoon. 'At first you used to imply that I was severe with you; and when I am kind you treat me unfairly.'

'No, no. Don't say so.'

The origin of their acquaintanceship had been such as to render their manner towards each other peculiar and uncommon. It was of a kind to

cause them to speak out their minds on any feelings of objection and difference: to be reticent on gentler matters.

'I have a good mind to go away and never trouble you again,' continued Knight.

She said nothing, but the eloquent expression of her eyes and wan face was enough to reproach him for harshness.

'Do you like me to be here, then?' inquired Knight gently.

'Yes,' she said. Fidelity to the old love and truth to the new were ranged on opposite sides, and truth virtuelessly prevailed.

'Then I'll stay a little longer,' said Knight.

'Don't be vexed if I keep by myself a good deal, will you? Perhaps something may happen, and I may tell you something.'

'Mere coyness,' said Knight to himself; and went away with a lighter heart. The trick of reading truly the enigmatical forces at work in women at given times, which with some men is an unerring instinct, is peculiar to minds less direct and honest than Knight's.

The next evening, about five o'clock, before Knight had returned from a pilgrimage along the shore, a man walked up to the house. He was a

messenger from Camelton, a town a few miles off, to which place the railway had been advanced during the summer.

'A telegram for Miss Swancourt, and three and sixpence to pay for the special messenger.' Miss Swancourt sent out the money, signed the paper, and opened her letter with a trembling hand. She read:

'Johnson, Liverpool, to Miss Swancourt, Endelstow, near Castle Boterel.

'Amaryllis telegraphed off Holyhead, four o'clock. Expect will dock and land passengers at Canning's Basin ten o'clock to-morrow morning.'

Her father called her into the study.

'Elfride, who sent you that message?' he asked suspiciously.

'Johnson.' 'Who is Johnson, for Heaven's sake?'

'I don't know.'

'The deuce you don't! Who is to know, then?'

'I have never heard of him till now.'

'That's a singular story, isn't it.'

'I don't know.'

'Come, come, miss! What was the telegram?'

'Do you really wish to know, papa?'

'Well, I do.'

'Remember, I am a full-grown woman now.'

'Well, what then?'

'Being a woman, and not a child, I may, I think, have a secret or two.'

'You will, it seems.'

'Women have, as a rule.'

'But don't keep them. So speak out.'

'If you will not press me now, I give my word to tell you the meaning of all this before the week is past.'

'On your honour?'

'On my honour.'

'Very well. I have had a certain suspicion, you know; and I shall be glad to find it false. I don't like your manner lately.'

'At the end of the week, I said, papa.'

Her father did not reply, and Elfride left the room.

She began to look out for the postman again. Three mornings later he brought an inland letter from Stephen. It contained very little matter, having been written in haste; but the meaning was bulky enough. Stephen said that, having executed a commission in Liverpool, he should arrive at his father's house, East Endelstow, at five or six o'clock that same evening; that he would after dusk walk on to the next village, and meet her, if she would, in the church porch, as in the old time. He proposed this plan because he thought it unadvisable to call formally at her house so late in the evening; yet he could not sleep without having seen her. The minutes would seem hours till he clasped her in his arms.

Elfride was still steadfast in her opinion that honour compelled her to meet him. Probably the very longing to avoid him lent additional weight to the conviction; for she was markedly one of those who sigh for the unattainable--to whom, superlatively, a hope is pleasing because not a possession. And she knew it so well that her intellect was inclined to

exaggerate this defect in herself.

So during the day she looked her duty steadfastly in the face; read Wordsworth's astringent yet depressing ode to that Deity; committed herself to her guidance; and still felt the weight of chance desires.

But she began to take a melancholy pleasure in contemplating the sacrifice of herself to the man whom a maidenly sense of propriety compelled her to regard as her only possible husband. She would meet him, and do all that lay in her power to marry him. To guard against a relapse, a note was at once despatched to his father's cottage for Stephen on his arrival, fixing an hour for the interview.