

## Chapter XXIII

'Should auld acquaintance be forgot?'

By this time Stephen Smith had stepped out upon the quay at Castle Boterel, and breathed his native air.

A darker skin, a more pronounced moustache, and an incipient beard, were the chief additions and changes noticeable in his appearance.

In spite of the falling rain, which had somewhat lessened, he took a small valise in his hand, and, leaving the remainder of his luggage at the inn, ascended the hills towards East Endelstow. This place lay in a vale of its own, further inland than the west village, and though so near it, had little of physical feature in common with the latter. East Endelstow was more wooded and fertile: it boasted of Lord Luxellian's mansion and park, and was free from those bleak open uplands which lent such an air of desolation to the vicinage of the coast--always excepting the small valley in which stood the vicarage and Mrs. Swancourt's old house, The Craggs.

Stephen had arrived nearly at the summit of the ridge when the rain again increased its volume, and, looking about for temporary shelter, he ascended a steep path which penetrated dense hazel bushes in the lower

part of its course. Further up it emerged upon a ledge immediately over the turnpike-road, and sheltered by an overhanging face of rubble rock, with bushes above. For a reason of his own he made this spot his refuge from the storm, and turning his face to the left, coned the landscape as a book.

He was overlooking the valley containing Elfride's residence.

From this point of observation the prospect exhibited the peculiarity of being either brilliant foreground or the subdued tone of distance, a sudden dip in the surface of the country lowering out of sight all the intermediate prospect. In apparent contact with the trees and bushes growing close beside him appeared the distant tract, terminated suddenly by the brink of the series of cliffs which culminated in the tall giant without a name--small and unimportant as here beheld. A leaf on a bough at Stephen's elbow blotted out a whole hill in the contrasting district far away; a green bunch of nuts covered a complete upland there, and the great cliff itself was outvied by a pigmy crag in the bank hard by him. Stephen had looked upon these things hundreds of times before to-day, but he had never viewed them with such tenderness as now.

Stepping forward in this direction yet a little further, he could see the tower of West Endelstow Church, beneath which he was to meet his Elfride that night. And at the same time he noticed, coming over the hill from the cliffs, a white speck in motion. It seemed first to be a sea-gull flying low, but ultimately proved to be a human figure, running

with great rapidity. The form flitted on, heedless of the rain which had caused Stephen's halt in this place, dropped down the heathery hill, entered the vale, and was out of sight.

Whilst he meditated upon the meaning of this phenomenon, he was surprised to see swim into his ken from the same point of departure another moving speck, as different from the first as well could be, insomuch that it was perceptible only by its blackness. Slowly and regularly it took the same course, and there was not much doubt that this was the form of a man. He, too, gradually descended from the upper levels, and was lost in the valley below.

The rain had by this time again abated, and Stephen returned to the road. Looking ahead, he saw two men and a cart. They were soon obscured by the intervention of a high hedge. Just before they emerged again he heard voices in conversation.

"A must soon be in the naighbourhood, too, if so be he's a-coming," said a tenor tongue, which Stephen instantly recognized as Martin Cannister's.

"A must 'a b'lieve," said another voice--that of Stephen's father.

Stephen stepped forward, and came before them face to face. His father and Martin were walking, dressed in their second best suits, and beside them rambled along a grizzel horse and brightly painted spring-cart.

'All right, Mr. Cannister; here's the lost man!' exclaimed young Smith, entering at once upon the old style of greeting. 'Father, here I am.'

'All right, my sonny; and glad I be for't!' returned John Smith, overjoyed to see the young man. 'How be ye? Well, come along home, and don't let's bide out here in the damp. Such weather must be terrible bad for a young chap just come from a fiery nation like Indy; hey, naighbour Cannister?'

'Trew, trew. And about getting home his traps? Boxes, monstrous bales, and noble packages of foreign description, I make no doubt?'

'Hardly all that,' said Stephen laughing.

'We brought the cart, maning to go right on to Castle Boterel afore ye landed,' said his father. "'Put in the horse," says Martin. "Ay," says I, "so we will;" and did it straightway. Now, maybe, Martin had better go on wi' the cart for the things, and you and I walk home-along.'

'And I shall be back a'most as soon as you. Peggy is a pretty step still, though time d' begin to tell upon her as upon the rest o' us.'

Stephen told Martin where to find his baggage, and then continued his journey homeward in the company of his father.

'Owing to your coming a day sooner than we first expected,' said John, 'you'll find us in a turk of a mess, sir--"sir," says I to my own son! but ye've gone up so, Stephen. We've killed the pig this morning for ye, thinking ye'd be hungry, and glad of a morsel of fresh mate. And 'a won't be cut up till to-night. However, we can make ye a good supper of fry, which will chaw up well wi' a dab o' mustard and a few nice new taters, and a drop of shilling ale to wash it down. Your mother have scrubbed the house through because ye were coming, and dusted all the chimmer furniture, and bought a new basin and jug of a travelling crockery-woman that came to our door, and scoured the cannel-sticks, and claned the winders! Ay, I don't know what 'a ha'n't a done. Never were such a steer, 'a b'lieve.'

Conversation of this kind and inquiries of Stephen for his mother's wellbeing occupied them for the remainder of the journey. When they drew near the river, and the cottage behind it, they could hear the master-mason's clock striking off the bygone hours of the day at intervals of a quarter of a minute, during which intervals Stephen's imagination readily pictured his mother's forefinger wandering round the dial in company with the minute-hand.

'The clock stopped this morning, and your mother in putting en right seemingly,' said his father in an explanatory tone; and they went up the garden to the door.

When they had entered, and Stephen had dutifully and warmly greeted his

mother--who appeared in a cotton dress of a dark-blue ground, covered broadcast with a multitude of new and full moons, stars, and planets, with an occasional dash of a comet-like aspect to diversify the scene--the crackle of cart-wheels was heard outside, and Martin Cannister stamped in at the doorway, in the form of a pair of legs beneath a great box, his body being nowhere visible. When the luggage had been all taken down, and Stephen had gone upstairs to change his clothes, Mrs. Smith's mind seemed to recover a lost thread.

'Really our clock is not worth a penny,' she said, turning to it and attempting to start the pendulum.

'Stopped again?' inquired Martin with commiseration.

'Yes, sure,' replied Mrs. Smith; and continued after the manner of certain matrons, to whose tongues the harmony of a subject with a casual mood is a greater recommendation than its pertinence to the occasion, 'John would spend pounds a year upon the jimcrack old thing, if he might, in having it claned, when at the same time you may doctor it yourself as well. "The clock's stopped again, John," I say to him. "Better have en claned," says he. There's five shillings. "That clock grinds again," I say to en. "Better have en claned," 'a says again. "That clock strikes wrong, John," says I. "Better have en claned," he goes on. The wheels would have been polished to skeletons by this time if I had listened to en, and I assure you we could have bought a chainey-faced beauty wi' the good money we've flung away these last ten

years upon this old green-faced mortal. And, Martin, you must be wet. My son is gone up to change. John is damper than I should like to be, but 'a calls it nothing. Some of Mrs. Swancourt's servants have been here--they ran in out of the rain when going for a walk--and I assure you the state of their bonnets was frightful.'

'How's the folks? We've been over to Castle Boterel, and what wi' running and stopping out of the storms, my poor head is beyond everything! fizz, fizz fizz; 'tis frying o' fish from morning to night,' said a cracked voice in the doorway at this instant.

'Lord so's, who's that?' said Mrs. Smith, in a private exclamation, and turning round saw William Worm, endeavouring to make himself look passing civil and friendly by overspreading his face with a large smile that seemed to have no connection with the humour he was in. Behind him stood a woman about twice his size, with a large umbrella over her head. This was Mrs. Worm, William's wife.

'Come in, William,' said John Smith. 'We don't kill a pig every day. And you, likewise, Mrs. Worm. I make ye welcome. Since ye left Parson Swancourt, William, I don't see much of 'ee.'

'No, for to tell the truth, since I took to the turn-pike-gate line, I've been out but little, coming to church o' Sundays not being my duty now, as 'twas in a parson's family, you see. However, our boy is able to mind the gate now, and I said, says I, "Barbara, let's call and see John

Smith."

'I am sorry to hear yer pore head is so bad still.'

'Ay, I assure you that frying o' fish is going on for nights and days. And, you know, sometimes 't isn't only fish, but rashers o' bacon and inions. Ay, I can hear the fat pop and fizz as nateral as life; can't I, Barbara?'

Mrs. Worm, who had been all this time engaged in closing her umbrella, corroborated this statement, and now, coming indoors, showed herself to be a wide-faced, comfortable-looking woman, with a wart upon her cheek, bearing a small tuft of hair in its centre.

'Have ye ever tried anything to cure yer noise, Maister Worm?' inquired Martin Cannister.

'Oh ay; bless ye, I've tried everything. Ay, Providence is a merciful man, and I have hoped He'd have found it out by this time, living so many years in a parson's family, too, as I have, but 'a don't seem to relieve me. Ay, I be a poor wambling man, and life's a mint o' trouble!'

'True, mournful true, William Worm. 'Tis so. The world wants looking to, or 'tis all sixes and sevens wi' us.'

'Take your things off, Mrs. Worm,' said Mrs. Smith. 'We be rather in a



muddle, to tell the truth, for my son is just dropped in from Indy a day sooner than we expected, and the pig-killer is coming presently to cut up.'

Mrs. Barbara Worm, not wishing to take any mean advantage of persons in a muddle by observing them, removed her bonnet and mantle with eyes fixed upon the flowers in the plot outside the door.

'What beautiful tiger-lilies!' said Mrs. Worm.

'Yes, they be very well, but such a trouble to me on account of the children that come here. They will go eating the berries on the stem, and call 'em currants. Taste wi' junivals is quite fancy, really.'

'And your snapdragons look as fierce as ever.'

'Well, really,' answered Mrs. Smith, entering didactically into the subject, 'they are more like Christians than flowers. But they make up well enough wi' the rest, and don't require much tending. And the same can be said o' these miller's wheels. 'Tis a flower I like very much, though so simple. John says he never cares about the flowers o' 'em, but men have no eye for anything neat. He says his favourite flower is a cauliflower. And I assure you I tremble in the springtime, for 'tis perfect murder.'

'You don't say so, Mrs. Smith!'

'John digs round the roots, you know. In goes his blundering spade, through roots, bulbs, everything that hasn't got a good show above ground, turning 'em up cut all to slices. Only the very last fall I went to move some tulips, when I found every bulb upside down, and the stems crooked round. He had turned 'em over in the spring, and the cunning creatures had soon found that heaven was not where it used to be.'

'What's that long-favoured flower under the hedge?'

'They? O Lord, they are the horrid Jacob's ladders! Instead of praising 'em, I be mad wi' 'em for being so ready to bide where they are not wanted. They be very well in their way, but I do not care for things that neglect won't kill. Do what I will, dig, drag, scrap, pull, I get too many of 'em. I chop the roots: up they'll come, treble strong. Throw 'em over hedge; there they'll grow, staring me in the face like a hungry dog driven away, and creep back again in a week or two the same as before. 'Tis Jacob's ladder here, Jacob's ladder there, and plant 'em where nothing in the world will grow, you get crowds of 'em in a month or two. John made a new manure mixen last summer, and he said, "Maria, now if you've got any flowers or such like, that you don't want, you may plant 'em round my mixen so as to hide it a bit, though 'tis not likely anything of much value will grow there." I thought, "There's them Jacob's ladders; I'll put them there, since they can't do harm in such a place;" and I planted the Jacob's ladders sure enough. They growed, and they growed, in the mixen and out of the mixen, all over the litter,

covering it quite up. When John wanted to use it about the garden, 'a said, "Nation seize them Jacob's ladders of yours, Maria! They've eat the goodness out of every morsel of my manure, so that 'tis no better than sand itself!" Sure enough the hungry mortals had. 'Tis my belief that in the secret souls o' 'em, Jacob's ladders be weeds, and not flowers at all, if the truth was known.'

Robert Lickpan, pig-killer and carrier, arrived at this moment. The fatted animal hanging in the back kitchen was cleft down the middle of its backbone, Mrs. Smith being meanwhile engaged in cooking supper.

Between the cutting and chopping, ale was handed round, and Worm and the pig-killer listened to John Smith's description of the meeting with Stephen, with eyes blankly fixed upon the table-cloth, in order that nothing in the external world should interrupt their efforts to conjure up the scene correctly.

Stephen came downstairs in the middle of the story, and after the little interruption occasioned by his entrance and welcome, the narrative was again continued, precisely as if he had not been there at all, and was told inclusively to him, as to somebody who knew nothing about the matter.

"Ay," I said, as I caught sight o' en through the brimbles, "that's the lad, for I d' know en by his grand-father's walk;" for 'a stapped out like poor father for all the world. Still there was a touch o' the

frisky that set me wondering. 'A got closer, and I said, "That's the lad, for I d' know en by his carrying a black case like a travelling man." Still, a road is common to all the world, and there be more travelling men than one. But I kept my eye cocked, and I said to Martin, "'Tis the boy, now, for I d' know en by the wold twirl o' the stick and the family step." Then 'a come closer, and a' said, "All right." I could swear to en then.'

Stephen's personal appearance was next criticised.

'He d' look a deal thinner in face, surely, than when I seed en at the parson's, and never knowed en, if ye'll believe me,' said Martin.

'Ay, there,' said another, without removing his eyes from Stephen's face, 'I should ha' knowed en anywhere. 'Tis his father's nose to a T.'

'It has been often remarked,' said Stephen modestly.

'And he's certainly taller,' said Martin, letting his glance run over Stephen's form from bottom to top.

'I was thinking 'a was exactly the same height,' Worm replied.

'Bless thy soul, that's because he's bigger round likewise.' And the united eyes all moved to Stephen's waist.

'I be a poor wambling man, but I can make allowances,' said William Worm. 'Ah, sure, and how he came as a stranger and pilgrim to Parson Swancourt's that time, not a soul knowing en after so many years! Ay, life's a strange picter, Stephen: but I suppose I must say Sir to ye?'

'Oh, it is not necessary at present,' Stephen replied, though mentally resolving to avoid the vicinity of that familiar friend as soon as he had made pretensions to the hand of Elfride.

'Ah, well,' said Worm musingly, 'some would have looked for no less than a Sir. There's a sight of difference in people.'

'And in pigs likewise,' observed John Smith, looking at the halved carcass of his own.

Robert Lickpan, the pig-killer, here seemed called upon to enter the lists of conversation.

'Yes, they've got their particular naters good-now,' he remarked initially. 'Many's the rum-tempered pig I've knowed.'

'I don't doubt it, Master Lickpan,' answered Martin, in a tone expressing that his convictions, no less than good manners, demanded the reply.

'Yes,' continued the pig-killer, as one accustomed to be heard. 'One

that I knowed was deaf and dumb, and we couldn't make out what was the matter wi' the pig. 'A would eat well enough when 'a seed the trough, but when his back was turned, you might a-rattled the bucket all day, the poor soul never heard ye. Ye could play tricks upon en behind his back, and a' wouldn't find it out no quicker than poor deaf Grammer Cates. But a' fatted well, and I never seed a pig open better when a' was killed, and 'a was very tender eating, very; as pretty a bit of mate as ever you see; you could suck that mate through a quill.

'And another I knowed,' resumed the killer, after quietly letting a pint of ale run down his throat of its own accord, and setting down the cup with mathematical exactness upon the spot from which he had raised it--'another went out of his mind.'

'How very mournful!' murmured Mrs. Worm.

'Ay, poor thing, 'a did! As clean out of his mind as the cleverest Christian could go. In early life 'a was very melancholy, and never seemed a hopeful pig by no means. 'Twas Andrew Stainer's pig--that's whose pig 'twas.'

'I can mind the pig well enough,' attested John Smith.

'And a pretty little porker 'a was. And you all know Farmer Buckle's sort? Every jack o' em suffer from the rheumatism to this day, owing to a damp sty they lived in when they were striplings, as 'twere.'

'Well, now we'll weigh,' said John.

'If so be he were not so fine, we'd weigh en whole: but as he is, we'll take a side at a time. John, you can mind my old joke, ey?'

'I do so; though 'twas a good few years ago I first heard en.'

'Yes,' said Lickpan, 'that there old familiar joke have been in our family for generations, I may say. My father used that joke regular at pig-killings for more than five and forty years--the time he followed the calling. And 'a told me that 'a had it from his father when he was quite a chiel, who made use o' en just the same at every killing more or less; and pig-killings were pig-killings in those days.'

'Trewly they were.'

'I've never heard the joke,' said Mrs. Smith tentatively.

'Nor I,' chimed in Mrs. Worm, who, being the only other lady in the room, felt bound by the laws of courtesy to feel like Mrs. Smith in everything.

'Surely, surely you have,' said the killer, looking sceptically at the benighted females. 'However, 't isn't much--I don't wish to say it is. It commences like this: "Bob will tell the weight of your pig, 'a b'lieve,"

says I. The congregation of neighbours think I mane my son Bob, naturally; but the secret is that I mane the bob o' the steelyard. Ha, ha, ha!

'Haw, haw, haw!' laughed Martin Cannister, who had heard the explanation of this striking story for the hundredth time.

'Huh, huh, huh!' laughed John Smith, who had heard it for the thousandth.

'Hee, hee, hee!' laughed William Worm, who had never heard it at all, but was afraid to say so.

'Thy grandfather, Robert, must have been a wide-awake chap to make that story,' said Martin Cannister, subsiding to a placid aspect of delighted criticism.

'He had a head, by all account. And, you see, as the first-born of the Lickpans have all been Roberts, they've all been Bobs, so the story was handed down to the present day.'

'Poor Joseph, your second boy, will never be able to bring it out in company, which is rather unfortunate,' said Mrs. Worm thoughtfully.

'A won't. Yes, grandfer was a clever chap, as ye say; but I knowed a cleverer. 'Twas my uncle Levi. Uncle Levi made a snuff-box that should



be a puzzle to his friends to open. He used to hand en round at wedding parties, christenings, funerals, and in other jolly company, and let 'em try their skill. This extraordinary snuff-box had a spring behind that would push in and out--a hinge where seemed to be the cover; a slide at the end, a screw in front, and knobs and queer notches everywhere. One man would try the spring, another would try the screw, another would try the slide; but try as they would, the box wouldn't open. And they couldn't open en, and they didn't open en. Now what might you think was the secret of that box?'

All put on an expression that their united thoughts were inadequate to the occasion.

'Why the box wouldn't open at all. 'A were made not to open, and ye might have tried till the end of Revelations, 'twould have been as naught, for the box were glued all round.'

'A very deep man to have made such a box.'

'Yes. 'Twas like uncle Levi all over.'

''Twas. I can mind the man very well. Tallest man ever I seed.'

'A was so. He never slept upon a bedstead after he growed up a hard boy-chap--never could get one long enough. When 'a lived in that little small house by the pond, he used to have to leave open his chamber door

every night at going to his bed, and let his feet poke out upon the landing.'

'He's dead and gone now, nevertheless, poor man, as we all shall,' observed Worm, to fill the pause which followed the conclusion of Robert Lickpan's speech.

The weighing and cutting up was pursued amid an animated discourse on Stephen's travels; and at the finish, the first-fruits of the day's slaughter, fried in onions, were then turned from the pan into a dish on the table, each piece steaming and hissing till it reached their very mouths.

It must be owned that the gentlemanly son of the house looked rather out of place in the course of this operation. Nor was his mind quite philosophic enough to allow him to be comfortable with these old-established persons, his father's friends. He had never lived long at home--scarcely at all since his childhood. The presence of William Worm was the most awkward feature of the case, for, though Worm had left the house of Mr. Swancourt, the being hand-in-glove with a *ci-devant* servitor reminded Stephen too forcibly of the vicar's classification of himself before he went from England. Mrs. Smith was conscious of the defect in her arrangements which had brought about the undesired conjunction. She spoke to Stephen privately.

'I am above having such people here, Stephen; but what could I do? And

your father is so rough in his nature that he's more mixed up with them than need be.'

'Never mind, mother,' said Stephen; 'I'll put up with it now.'

'When we leave my lord's service, and get further up the country--as I hope we shall soon--it will be different. We shall be among fresh people, and in a larger house, and shall keep ourselves up a bit, I hope.'

'Is Miss Swancourt at home, do you know?' Stephen inquired

'Yes, your father saw her this morning.'

'Do you often see her?'

'Scarcely ever. Mr. Glim, the curate, calls occasionally, but the Swancourts don't come into the village now any more than to drive through it. They dine at my lord's oftener than they used. Ah, here's a note was brought this morning for you by a boy.'

Stephen eagerly took the note and opened it, his mother watching him. He read what Elfride had written and sent before she started for the cliff that afternoon:

'Yes; I will meet you in the church at nine to-night.--E. S.'

'I don't know, Stephen,' his mother said meaningly, 'whe'r you still think about Miss Elfride, but if I were you I wouldn't concern about her. They say that none of old Mrs. Swancourt's money will come to her step-daughter.'

'I see the evening has turned out fine; I am going out for a little while to look round the place,' he said, evading the direct query.

'Probably by the time I return our visitors will be gone, and we'll have a more confidential talk.'