Chapter XXV

'Mine own familiar friend.'

During these days of absence Stephen lived under alternate conditions. Whenever his emotions were active, he was in agony. Whenever he was not in agony, the business in hand had driven out of his mind by sheer force all deep reflection on the subject of Elfride and love.

By the time he took his return journey at the week's end, Stephen had very nearly worked himself up to an intention to call and see her face to face. On this occasion also he adopted his favourite route--by the little summer steamer from Bristol to Castle Boterel; the time saved by speed on the railway being wasted at junctions, and in following a devious course.

It was a bright silent evening at the beginning of September when Smith again set foot in the little town. He felt inclined to linger awhile upon the quay before ascending the hills, having formed a romantic intention to go home by way of her house, yet not wishing to wander in its neighbourhood till the evening shades should sufficiently screen him from observation.

And thus waiting for night's nearer approach, he watched the placid scene, over which the pale luminosity of the west cast a sorrowful

monochrome, that became slowly embrowned by the dusk. A star appeared, and another, and another. They sparkled amid the yards and rigging of the two coal brigs lying alangside, as if they had been tiny lamps suspended in the ropes. The masts rocked sleepily to the infinitesimal flux of the tide, which clucked and gurgled with idle regularity in nooks and holes of the harbour wall.

The twilight was now quite pronounced enough for his purpose; and as, rather sad at heart, he was about to move on, a little boat containing two persons glided up the middle of the harbour with the lightness of a shadow. The boat came opposite him, passed on, and touched the landing-steps at the further end. One of its occupants was a man, as Stephen had known by the easy stroke of the oars. When the pair ascended the steps, and came into greater prominence, he was enabled to discern that the second personage was a woman; also that she wore a white decoration--apparently a feather--in her hat or bonnet, which spot of white was the only distinctly visible portion of her clothing.

Stephen remained a moment in their rear, and they passed on, when he pursued his way also, and soon forgot the circumstance. Having crossed a bridge, forsaken the high road, and entered the footpath which led up the vale to West Endelstow, he heard a little wicket click softly together some yards ahead. By the time that Stephen had reached the wicket and passed it, he heard another click of precisely the same nature from another gate yet further on. Clearly some person or persons were preceding him along the path, their footsteps being rendered

noiseless by the soft carpet of turf. Stephen now walked a little quicker, and perceived two forms. One of them bore aloft the white feather he had noticed in the woman's hat on the quay: they were the couple he had seen in the boat. Stephen dropped a little further to the rear.

From the bottom of the valley, along which the path had hitherto lain, beside the margin of the trickling streamlet, another path now diverged, and ascended the slope of the left-hand hill. This footway led only to the residence of Mrs. Swancourt and a cottage or two in its vicinity. No grass covered this diverging path in portions of its length, and Stephen was reminded that the pair in front of him had taken this route by the occasional rattle of loose stones under their feet. Stephen climbed in the same direction, but for some undefined reason he trod more softly than did those preceding him. His mind was unconsciously in exercise upon whom the woman might be--whether a visitor to The Crags, a servant, or Elfride. He put it to himself yet more forcibly; could the lady be Elfride? A possible reason for her unaccountable failure to keep the appointment with him returned with painful force.

They entered the grounds of the house by the side wicket, whence the path, now wide and well trimmed, wound fantastically through the shrubbery to an octagonal pavilion called the Belvedere, by reason of the comprehensive view over the adjacent district that its green seats afforded. The path passed this erection and went on to the house as well as to the gardener's cottage on the other side, straggling thence

to East Endelstow; so that Stephen felt no hesitation in entering a promenade which could scarcely be called private.

He fancied that he heard the gate open and swing together again behind him. Turning, he saw nobody.

The people of the boat came to the summer-house. One of them spoke.

'I am afraid we shall get a scolding for being so late.'

Stephen instantly recognised the familiar voice, richer and fuller now than it used to be. 'Elfride!' he whispered to himself, and held fast by a sapling, to steady himself under the agitation her presence caused him. His heart swerved from its beat; he shunned receiving the meaning he sought.

'A breeze is rising again; how the ash tree rustles!' said Elfride. 'Don't you hear it? I wonder what the time is.'

Stephen relinquished the sapling.

'I will get a light and tell you. Step into the summer-house; the air is quiet there.'

The cadence of that voice--its peculiarity seemed to come home to him like that of some notes of the northern birds on his return to his

native clime, as an old natural thing renewed, yet not particularly noticed as natural before that renewal.

They entered the Belvedere. In the lower part it was formed of close wood-work nailed crosswise, and had openings in the upper by way of windows.

The scratch of a striking light was heard, and a bright glow radiated from the interior of the building. The light gave birth to dancing leaf-shadows, stem-shadows, lustrous streaks, dots, sparkles, and threads of silver sheen of all imaginable variety and transience. It awakened gnats, which flew towards it, revealed shiny gossamer threads, disturbed earthworms. Stephen gave but little attention to these phenomena, and less time. He saw in the summer-house a strongly illuminated picture.

First, the face of his friend and preceptor Henry Knight, between whom and himself an estrangement had arisen, not from any definite causes beyond those of absence, increasing age, and diverging sympathies.

Next, his bright particular star, Elfride. The face of Elfride was more womanly than when she had called herself his, but as clear and healthy as ever. Her plenteous twines of beautiful hair were looking much as usual, with the exception of a slight modification in their arrangement in deference to the changes of fashion.

Their two foreheads were close together, almost touching, and both were looking down. Elfride was holding her watch, Knight was holding the light with one hand, his left arm being round her waist. Part of the scene reached Stephen's eyes through the horizontal bars of woodwork, which crossed their forms like the ribs of a skeleton.

Knight's arm stole still further round the waist of Elfride.

'It is half-past eight,' she said in a low voice, which had a peculiar music in it, seemingly born of a thrill of pleasure at the new proof that she was beloved.

The flame dwindled down, died away, and all was wrapped in a darkness to which the gloom before the illumination bore no comparison in apparent density. Stephen, shattered in spirit and sick to his heart's centre, turned away. In turning, he saw a shadowy outline behind the summer-house on the other side. His eyes grew accustomed to the darkness. Was the form a human form, or was it an opaque bush of juniper?

The lovers arose, brushed against the laurestines, and pursued their way to the house. The indistinct figure had moved, and now passed across Smith's front. So completely enveloped was the person, that it was impossible to discern him or her any more than as a shape. The shape glided noiselessly on.

Stephen stepped forward, fearing any mischief was intended to the other two. 'Who are you?' he said.

'Never mind who I am,' answered a weak whisper from the enveloping folds. 'WHAT I am, may she be! Perhaps I knew well--ah, so well!--a youth whose place you took, as he there now takes yours. Will you let her break your heart, and bring you to an untimely grave, as she did the one before you?'

'You are Mrs. Jethway, I think. What do you do here? And why do you talk so wildly?'

'Because my heart is desolate, and nobody cares about it. May hers be so that brought trouble upon me!'

'Silence!' said Stephen, staunch to Elfride in spite of himself. 'She would harm nobody wilfully, never would she! How do you come here?'

'I saw the two coming up the path, and wanted to learn if she were not one of them. Can I help disliking her if I think of the past? Can I help watching her if I remember my boy? Can I help ill-wishing her if I well-wish him?'

The bowed form went on, passed through the wicket, and was enveloped by the shadows of the field.

Stephen had heard that Mrs. Jethway, since the death of her son, had become a crazed, forlorn woman; and bestowing a pitying thought upon her, he dismissed her fancied wrongs from his mind, but not her condemnation of Elfride's faithlessness. That entered into and mingled with the sensations his new experience had begotten. The tale told by the little scene he had witnessed ran parallel with the unhappy woman's opinion, which, however baseless it might have been antecedently, had become true enough as regarded himself.

A slow weight of despair, as distinct from a violent paroxysm as starvation from a mortal shot, filled him and wrung him body and soul. The discovery had not been altogether unexpected, for throughout his anxiety of the last few days since the night in the churchyard, he had been inclined to construe the uncertainty unfavourably for himself. His hopes for the best had been but periodic interruptions to a chronic fear of the worst.

A strange concomitant of his misery was the singularity of its form. That his rival should be Knight, whom once upon a time he had adored as a man is very rarely adored by another in modern times, and whom he loved now, added deprecation to sorrow, and cynicism to both. Henry Knight, whose praises he had so frequently trumpeted in her ears, of whom she had actually been jealous, lest she herself should be lessened in Stephen's love on account of him, had probably won her the more easily by reason of those very praises which he had only ceased to utter by her command. She had ruled him like a queen in that matter, as in

all others. Stephen could tell by her manner, brief as had been his observation of it, and by her words, few as they were, that her position was far different with Knight. That she looked up at and adored her new lover from below his pedestal, was even more perceptible than that she had smiled down upon Stephen from a height above him.

The suddenness of Elfride's renunciation of himself was food for more torture. To an unimpassioned outsider, it admitted of at least two interpretations--it might either have proceeded from an endeavour to be faithful to her first choice, till the lover seen absolutely overpowered the lover remembered, or from a wish not to lose his love till sure of the love of another. But to Stephen Smith the motive involved in the latter alternative made it untenable where Elfride was the actor.

He mused on her letters to him, in which she had never mentioned a syllable concerning Knight. It is desirable, however, to observe that only in two letters could she possibly have done so. One was written about a week before Knight's arrival, when, though she did not mention his promised coming to Stephen, she had hardly a definite reason in her mind for neglecting to do it. In the next she did casually allude to Knight. But Stephen had left Bombay long before that letter arrived.

Stephen looked at the black form of the adjacent house, where it cut a dark polygonal notch out of the sky, and felt that he hated the spot. He did not know many facts of the case, but could not help instinctively associating Elfride's fickleness with the marriage of her father, and

their introduction to London society. He closed the iron gate bounding the shrubbery as noiselessly as he had opened it, and went into the grassy field. Here he could see the old vicarage, the house alone that was associated with the sweet pleasant time of his incipient love for Elfride. Turning sadly from the place that was no longer a nook in which his thoughts might nestle when he was far away, he wandered in the direction of the east village, to reach his father's house before they retired to rest.

The nearest way to the cottage was by crossing the park. He did not hurry. Happiness frequently has reason for haste, but it is seldom that desolation need scramble or strain. Sometimes he paused under the low-hanging arms of the trees, looking vacantly on the ground.

Stephen was standing thus, scarcely less crippled in thought than he was blank in vision, when a clear sound permeated the quiet air about him, and spread on far beyond. The sound was the stroke of a bell from the tower of East Endelstow Church, which stood in a dell not forty yards from Lord Luxellian's mansion, and within the park enclosure. Another stroke greeted his ear, and gave character to both: then came a slow succession of them.

'Somebody is dead,' he said aloud.

The death-knell of an inhabitant of the eastern parish was being tolled.

An unusual feature in the tolling was that it had not been begun according to the custom in Endelstow and other parishes in the neighbourhood. At every death the sex and age of the deceased were announced by a system of changes. Three times three strokes signified that the departed one was a man; three times two, a woman; twice three, a boy; twice two, a girl. The regular continuity of the tolling suggested that it was the resumption rather than the beginning of a knell--the opening portion of which Stephen had not been near enough to hear.

The momentary anxiety he had felt with regard to his parents passed away. He had left them in perfect health, and had any serious illness seized either, a communication would have reached him ere this. At the same time, since his way homeward lay under the churchyard yews, he resolved to look into the belfry in passing by, and speak a word to Martin Cannister, who would be there.

Stephen reached the brow of the hill, and felt inclined to renounce his idea. His mood was such that talking to any person to whom he could not unburden himself would be wearisome. However, before he could put any inclination into effect, the young man saw from amid the trees a bright light shining, the rays from which radiated like needles through the sad plumy foliage of the yews. Its direction was from the centre of the churchyard.

Stephen mechanically went forward. Never could there be a greater

contrast between two places of like purpose than between this graveyard and that of the further village. Here the grass was carefully tended, and formed virtually a part of the manor-house lawn; flowers and shrubs being planted indiscriminately over both, whilst the few graves visible were mathematically exact in shape and smoothness, appearing in the daytime like chins newly shaven. There was no wall, the division between God's Acre and Lord Luxellian's being marked only by a few square stones set at equidistant points. Among those persons who have romantic sentiments on the subject of their last dwelling-place, probably the greater number would have chosen such a spot as this in preference to any other: a few would have fancied a constraint in its trim neatness, and would have preferred the wild hill-top of the neighbouring site, with Nature in her most negligent attire.

The light in the churchyard he next discovered to have its source in a point very near the ground, and Stephen imagined it might come from a lantern in the interior of a partly-dug grave. But a nearer approach showed him that its position was immediately under the wall of the aisle, and within the mouth of an archway. He could now hear voices, and the truth of the whole matter began to dawn upon him. Walking on towards the opening, Smith discerned on his left hand a heap of earth, and before him a flight of stone steps which the removed earth had uncovered, leading down under the edifice. It was the entrance to a large family vault, extending under the north aisle.

Stephen had never before seen it open, and descending one or two steps

stooped to look under the arch. The vault appeared to be crowded with coffins, with the exception of an open central space, which had been necessarily kept free for ingress and access to the sides, round three of which the coffins were stacked in stone bins or niches.

The place was well lighted with candles stuck in slips of wood that were fastened to the wall. On making the descent of another step the living inhabitants of the vault were recognizable. They were his father the master-mason, an under-mason, Martin Cannister, and two or three young and old labouring-men. Crowbars and workmen's hammers were scattered about. The whole company, sitting round on coffins which had been removed from their places, apparently for some alteration or enlargement of the vault, were eating bread and cheese, and drinking ale from a cup with two handles, passed round from each to each.

'Who is dead?' Stephen inquired, stepping down.