

## Chapter XXVI

'To that last nothing under earth.'

All eyes were turned to the entrance as Stephen spoke, and the ancient-mannered conclave scrutinized him inquiringly.

'Why, 'tis our Stephen!' said his father, rising from his seat; and, still retaining the frothy mug in his left hand, he swung forward his right for a grasp. 'Your mother is expecting ye--thought you would have come afore dark. But you'll wait and go home with me? I have all but done for the day, and was going directly.'

'Yes, 'tis Master Stephy, sure enough. Glad to see you so soon again, Master Smith,' said Martin Cannister, chastening the gladness expressed in his words by a strict neutrality of countenance, in order to harmonize the feeling as much as possible with the solemnity of a family vault.

'The same to you, Martin; and you, William,' said Stephen, nodding around to the rest, who, having their mouths full of bread and cheese, were of necessity compelled to reply merely by compressing their eyes to friendly lines and wrinkles.

'And who is dead?' Stephen repeated.

'Lady Luxellian, poor gentlewoman, as we all shall, said the under-mason. 'Ay, and we be going to enlarge the vault to make room for her.'

'When did she die?'

'Early this morning,' his father replied, with an appearance of recurring to a chronic thought. 'Yes, this morning. Martin hev been tolling ever since, almost. There, 'twas expected. She was very limber.'

'Ay, poor soul, this morning,' resumed the under-mason, a marvellously old man, whose skin seemed so much too large for his body that it would not stay in position. 'She must know by this time whether she's to go up or down, poor woman.'

'What was her age?'

'Not more than seven or eight and twenty by candlelight. But, Lord! by day 'a was forty if 'a were an hour.'

'Ay, night-time or day-time makes a difference of twenty years to rich feymels,' observed Martin.

'She was one and thirty really,' said John Smith. 'I had it from them that know.'

'Not more than that!'

"A looked very bad, poor lady. In faith, ye might say she was dead for years afore 'a would own it.'

'As my old father used to say, "dead, but wouldn't drop down."'

'I seed her, poor soul,' said a labourer from behind some removed coffins, 'only but last Valentine's-day of all the world. 'A was arm in crook wi' my lord. I says to myself, "You be ticketed Churchyard, my noble lady, although you don't dream on't."'

'I suppose my lord will write to all the other lords anointed in the nation, to let 'em know that she that was is now no more?'

"'Tis done and past. I see a bundle of letters go off an hour after the death. Sich wonderful black rims as they letters had--half-an-inch wide, at the very least.'

'Too much,' observed Martin. 'In short, 'tis out of the question that a human being can be so mournful as black edges half-an-inch wide. I'm sure people don't feel more than a very narrow border when they feels most of all.'

'And there are two little girls, are there not?' said Stephen.

'Nice clane little faces!--left motherless now.'

'They used to come to Parson Swancourt's to play with Miss Elfride when I were there,' said William Worm. 'Ah, they did so's!' The latter sentence was introduced to add the necessary melancholy to a remark which, intrinsically, could hardly be made to possess enough for the occasion. 'Yes,' continued Worm, 'they'd run upstairs, they'd run down; flitting about with her everywhere. Very fond of her, they were. Ah, well!'

'Fonder than ever they were of their mother, so 'tis said here and there,' added a labourer.

'Well, you see, 'tis natural. Lady Luxellian stood aloof from 'em so--was so drowsy-like, that they couldn't love her in the jolly-companion way children want to like folks. Only last winter I seed Miss Elfride talking to my lady and the two children, and Miss Elfride wiped their noses for em' SO careful--my lady never once seeing that it wanted doing; and, naturally, children take to people that's their best friend.'

'Be as 'twill, the woman is dead and gone, and we must make a place for her,' said John. 'Come, lads, drink up your ale, and we'll just rid this corner, so as to have all clear for beginning at the wall, as soon as 'tis light to-morrow.'

Stephen then asked where Lady Luxellian was to lie.

'Here,' said his father. 'We are going to set back this wall and make a recess; and 'tis enough for us to do before the funeral. When my lord's mother died, she said, "John, the place must be enlarged before another can be put in." But 'a never expected 'twould be wanted so soon. Better move Lord George first, I suppose, Simeon?'

He pointed with his foot to a heavy coffin, covered with what had originally been red velvet, the colour of which could only just be distinguished now.

'Just as ye think best, Master John,' replied the shrivelled mason. 'Ah, poor Lord George!' he continued, looking contemplatively at the huge coffin; 'he and I were as bitter enemies once as any could be when one is a lord and t'other only a mortal man. Poor fellow! He'd clap his hand upon my shoulder and cuss me as familial and neighbourly as if he'd been a common chap. Ay, 'a cussed me up hill and 'a cussed me down; and then 'a would rave out again, and the goold clamps of his fine new teeth would glisten in the sun like fetters of brass, while I, being a small man and poor, was fain to say nothing at all. Such a strappen fine gentleman as he was too! Yes, I rather liked en sometimes. But once now and then, when I looked at his towering height, I'd think in my inside, "What a weight you'll be, my lord, for our arms to lower under the aisle of Endelstow Church some day!"'

'And was he?' inquired a young labourer.

'He was. He was five hundredweight if 'a were a pound. What with his lead, and his oak, and his handles, and his one thing and t'other'--here the ancient man slapped his hand upon the cover with a force that caused a rattle among the bones inside--'he half broke my back when I took his feet to lower en down the steps there. "Ah," saith I to John there--didn't I, John?--"that ever one man's glory should be such a weight upon another man!" But there, I liked my lord George sometimes.'

"'Tis a strange thought,' said another, 'that while they be all here under one roof, a snug united family o' Luxellians, they be really scattered miles away from one another in the form of good sheep and wicked goats, isn't it?'

'True; 'tis a thought to look at.'

'And that one, if he's gone upward, don't know what his wife is doing no more than the man in the moon if she's gone downward. And that some unfortunate one in the hot place is a-hollering across to a lucky one up in the clouds, and quite forgetting their bodies be boxed close together all the time.'

'Ay, 'tis a thought to look at, too, that I can say "Hullo!" close to fiery Lord George, and 'a can't hear me.'

'And that I be eating my onion close to dainty Lady Jane's nose, and she can't smell me.'

'What do 'em put all their heads one way for?' inquired a young man.

'Because 'tis churchyard law, you simple. The law of the living is, that a man shall be upright and down-right, and the law of the dead is, that a man shall be east and west. Every state of society have its laws.'

'We must break the law wi' a few of the poor souls, however. Come, buckle to,' said the master-mason.

And they set to work anew.

The order of interment could be distinctly traced by observing the appearance of the coffins as they lay piled around. On those which had been standing there but a generation or two the trappings still remained. Those of an earlier period showed bare wood, with a few tattered rags dangling therefrom. Earlier still, the wood lay in fragments on the floor of the niche, and the coffin consisted of naked lead alone; whilst in the case of the very oldest, even the lead was bulging and cracking in pieces, revealing to the curious eye a heap of dust within. The shields upon many were quite loose, and removable by the hand, their lustreless surfaces still indistinctly exhibiting the name and title of the deceased.

Overhead the groins and concavities of the arches curved in all directions, dropping low towards the walls, where the height was no more than sufficient to enable a person to stand upright.

The body of George the fourteenth baron, together with two or three others, all of more recent date than the great bulk of coffins piled there, had, for want of room, been placed at the end of the vault on tressels, and not in niches like the others. These it was necessary to remove, to form behind them the chamber in which they were ultimately to be deposited. Stephen, finding the place and proceedings in keeping with the sombre colours of his mind, waited there still.

'Simeon, I suppose you can mind poor Lady Elfride, and how she ran away with the actor?' said John Smith, after awhile. 'I think it fell upon the time my father was sexton here. Let us see--where is she?'

'Here somewhere,' returned Simeon, looking round him.

'Why, I've got my arms round the very gentlewoman at this moment.' He lowered the end of the coffin he was holding, wiped his face, and throwing a morsel of rotten wood upon another as an indicator, continued: 'That's her husband there. They was as fair a couple as you should see anywhere round about; and a good-hearted pair likewise. Ay, I can mind it, though I was but a chiel at the time. She fell in love with this young man of hers, and their banns were asked in some church in

London; and the old lord her father actually heard 'em asked the three times, and didn't notice her name, being gabbled on wi' a host of others. When she had married she told her father, and 'a fled into a monstrous rage, and said she shouldn' hae a farthing. Lady Elfride said she didn't think of wishing it; if he'd forgie her 'twas all she asked, and as for a living, she was content to play plays with her husband. This frightened the old lord, and 'a gie'd 'em a house to live in, and a great garden, and a little field or two, and a carriage, and a good few guineas. Well, the poor thing died at her first gossiping, and her husband--who was as tender-hearted a man as ever eat meat, and would have died for her--went wild in his mind, and broke his heart (so 'twas said). Anyhow, they were buried the same day--father and mother--but the baby lived. Ay, my lord's family made much of that man then, and put him here with his wife, and there in the corner the man is now. The Sunday after there was a funeral sermon: the text was, "Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken;" and when 'twas preaching the men drew their hands across their eyes several times, and every woman cried out loud.'

'And what became of the baby?' said Stephen, who had frequently heard portions of the story.

'She was brought up by her grandmother, and a pretty maid she were. And she must needs run away with the curate--Parson Swancourt that is now. Then her grandmother died, and the title and everything went away to another branch of the family altogether. Parson Swancourt wasted a good

deal of his wife's money, and she left him Miss Elfride. That trick of running away seems to be handed down in families, like craziness or gout. And they two women be alike as peas.'

'Which two?'

'Lady Elfride and young Miss that's alive now. The same hair and eyes: but Miss Elfride's mother was darker a good deal.'

'Life's a strangle bubble, ye see,' said William Worm musingly. 'For if the Lord's anointment had descended upon women instead of men, Miss Elfride would be Lord Luxellian--Lady, I mane. But as it is, the blood is run out, and she's nothing to the Luxellian family by law, whatever she may be by gospel.'

'I used to fancy,' said Simeon, 'when I seed Miss Elfride hugging the little ladyships, that there was a likeness; but I suppose 'twas only my dream, for years must have altered the old family shape.'

'And now we'll move these two, and home-along,' interposed John Smith, reviving, as became a master, the spirit of labour, which had showed unmistakable signs of being nearly vanquished by the spirit of chat, 'The flagon of ale we don't want we'll let bide here till to-morrow; none of the poor souls will touch it 'a b'lieve.'

So the evening's work was concluded, and the party drew from the abode

of the quiet dead, closing the old iron door, and shooting the lock loudly into the huge copper staple--an incongruous act of imprisonment towards those who had no dreams of escape.