

## Chapter XXVII

'How should I greet thee?'

Love frequently dies of time alone--much more frequently of displacement. With Elfride Swancourt, a powerful reason why the displacement should be successful was that the new-comer was a greater man than the first. By the side of the instructive and piquant snubbings she received from Knight, Stephen's general agreeableness seemed watery; by the side of Knight's spare love-making, Stephen's continual outflow seemed lackadaisical. She had begun to sigh for somebody further on in manhood. Stephen was hardly enough of a man.

Perhaps there was a proneness to inconstancy in her nature--a nature, to those who contemplate it from a standpoint beyond the influence of that inconstancy, the most exquisite of all in its plasticity and ready sympathies. Partly, too, Stephen's failure to make his hold on her heart a permanent one was his too timid habit of dispraising himself beside her--a peculiarity which, exercised towards sensible men, stirs a kindly chord of attachment that a marked assertiveness would leave untouched, but inevitably leads the most sensible woman in the world to undervalue him who practises it. Directly domineering ceases in the man, snubbing begins in the woman; the trite but no less unfortunate fact being that the gentler creature rarely has the capacity to appreciate fair treatment from her natural complement. The abiding perception of the

position of Stephen's parents had, of course, a little to do with Elfride's renunciation. To such girls poverty may not be, as to the more worldly masses of humanity, a sin in itself; but it is a sin, because graceful and dainty manners seldom exist in such an atmosphere. Few women of old family can be thoroughly taught that a fine soul may wear a smock-frock, and an admittedly common man in one is but a worm in their eyes. John Smith's rough hands and clothes, his wife's dialect, the necessary narrowness of their ways, being constantly under Elfride's notice, were not without their deflecting influence.

On reaching home after the perilous adventure by the sea-shore, Knight had felt unwell, and retired almost immediately. The young lady who had so materially assisted him had done the same, but she reappeared, properly clothed, about five o'clock. She wandered restlessly about the house, but not on account of their joint narrow escape from death. The storm which had torn the tree had merely bowed the reed, and with the deliverance of Knight all deep thought of the accident had left her. The mutual avowal which it had been the means of precipitating occupied a far longer length of her meditations.

Elfride's disquiet now was on account of that miserable promise to meet Stephen, which returned like a spectre again and again. The perception of his littleness beside Knight grew upon her alarmingly. She now thought how sound had been her father's advice to her to give him up, and was as passionately desirous of following it as she had hitherto been averse. Perhaps there is nothing more hardening to the tone of

young minds than thus to discover how their dearest and strongest wishes become gradually attuned by Time the Cynic to the very note of some selfish policy which in earlier days they despised.

The hour of appointment came, and with it a crisis; and with the crisis a collapse.

'God forgive me--I can't meet Stephen!' she exclaimed to herself. 'I don't love him less, but I love Mr. Knight more!'

Yes: she would save herself from a man not fit for her--in spite of vows. She would obey her father, and have no more to do with Stephen Smith. Thus the fickle resolve showed signs of assuming the complexion of a virtue.

The following days were passed without any definite avowal from Knight's lips. Such solitary walks and scenes as that witnessed by Smith in the summer-house were frequent, but he courted her so intangibly that to any but such a delicate perception as Elfride's it would have appeared no courtship at all. The time now really began to be sweet with her. She dismissed the sense of sin in her past actions, and was automatic in the intoxication of the moment. The fact that Knight made no actual declaration was no drawback. Knowing since the betrayal of his sentiments that love for her really existed, she preferred it for the present in its form of essence, and was willing to avoid for awhile the grosser medium of words. Their feelings having been forced to a rather

premature demonstration, a reaction was indulged in by both.

But no sooner had she got rid of her troubled conscience on the matter of faithlessness than a new anxiety confronted her. It was lest Knight should accidentally meet Stephen in the parish, and that herself should be the subject of discourse.

Elfride, learning Knight more thoroughly, perceived that, far from having a notion of Stephen's precedence, he had no idea that she had ever been wooed before by anybody. On ordinary occasions she had a tongue so frank as to show her whole mind, and a mind so straightforward as to reveal her heart to its innermost shrine. But the time for a change had come. She never alluded to even a knowledge of Knight's friend. When women are secret they are secret indeed; and more often than not they only begin to be secret with the advent of a second lover.

The elopement was now a spectre worse than the first, and, like the Spirit in Glenfinlas, it waxed taller with every attempt to lay it. Her natural honesty invited her to confide in Knight, and trust to his generosity for forgiveness: she knew also that as mere policy it would be better to tell him early if he was to be told at all. The longer her concealment the more difficult would be the revelation. But she put it off. The intense fear which accompanies intense love in young women was too strong to allow the exercise of a moral quality antagonistic to itself:

'Where love is great, the littlest doubts are fear;  
Where little fears grow great, great love grows there.'

The match was looked upon as made by her father and mother. The vicar remembered her promise to reveal the meaning of the telegram she had received, and two days after the scene in the summer-house, asked her pointedly. She was frank with him now.

'I had been corresponding with Stephen Smith ever since he left England, till lately,' she calmly said.

'What!' cried the vicar aghast; 'under the eyes of Mr. Knight, too?'

'No; when I found I cared most for Mr. Knight, I obeyed you.'

'You were very kind, I'm sure. When did you begin to like Mr. Knight?'

'I don't see that that is a pertinent question, papa; the telegram was from the shipping agent, and was not sent at my request. It announced the arrival of the vessel bringing him home.'

'Home! What, is he here?'

'Yes; in the village, I believe.'

'Has he tried to see you?'

'Only by fair means. But don't, papa, question me so! It is torture.'

'I will only say one word more,' he replied. 'Have you met him?'

'I have not. I can assure you that at the present moment there is no more of an understanding between me and the young man you so much disliked than between him and you. You told me to forget him; and I have forgotten him.'

'Oh, well; though you did not obey me in the beginning, you are a good girl, Elfride, in obeying me at last.'

'Don't call me "good," papa,' she said bitterly; 'you don't know--and the less said about some things the better. Remember, Mr. Knight knows nothing about the other. Oh, how wrong it all is! I don't know what I am coming to.'

'As matters stand, I should be inclined to tell him; or, at any rate, I should not alarm myself about his knowing. He found out the other day that this was the parish young Smith's father lives in--what puts you in such a flurry?'

'I can't say; but promise--pray don't let him know! It would be my

ruin!"

'Pooh, child. Knight is a good fellow and a clever man; but at the same time it does not escape my perceptions that he is no great catch for you. Men of his turn of mind are nothing so wonderful in the way of husbands. If you had chosen to wait, you might have mated with a much wealthier man. But remember, I have not a word to say against your having him, if you like him. Charlotte is delighted, as you know.'

'Well, papa,' she said, smiling hopefully through a sigh, 'it is nice to feel that in giving way to--to caring for him, I have pleased my family. But I am not good; oh no, I am very far from that!'

'None of us are good, I am sorry to say,' said her father blandly; 'but girls have a chartered right to change their minds, you know. It has been recognized by poets from time immemorial. Catullus says, "Mulier cupido quod dicit amanti, in vento--" What a memory mine is! However, the passage is, that a woman's words to a lover are as a matter of course written only on wind and water. Now don't be troubled about that, Elfride.'

'Ah, you don't know!'

They had been standing on the lawn, and Knight was now seen lingering some way down a winding walk. When Elfride met him, it was with a much greater lightness of heart; things were more straightforward now. The

responsibility of her fickleness seemed partly shifted from her own shoulders to her father's. Still, there were shadows.

'Ah, could he have known how far I went with Stephen, and yet have said the same, how much happier I should be!' That was her prevailing thought.

In the afternoon the lovers went out together on horseback for an hour or two; and though not wishing to be observed, by reason of the late death of Lady Luxellian, whose funeral had taken place very privately on the previous day, they yet found it necessary to pass East Endelstow Church.

The steps to the vault, as has been stated, were on the outside of the building, immediately under the aisle wall. Being on horseback, both Knight and Elfride could overlook the shrubs which screened the church-yard.

'Look, the vault seems still to be open,' said Knight.

'Yes, it is open,' she answered

'Who is that man close by it? The mason, I suppose?'

'Yes.'



'I wonder if it is John Smith, Stephen's father?'

'I believe it is,' said Elfride, with apprehension.

'Ah, and can it be? I should like to inquire how his son, my truant protege', is going on. And from your father's description of the vault, the interior must be interesting. Suppose we go in.'

'Had we better, do you think? May not Lord Luxellian be there?'

'It is not at all likely.'

Elfride then assented, since she could do nothing else. Her heart, which at first had quailed in consternation, recovered itself when she considered the character of John Smith. A quiet unassuming man, he would be sure to act towards her as before those love passages with his son, which might have given a more pretentious mechanic airs. So without much alarm she took Knight's arm after dismounting, and went with him between and over the graves. The master-mason recognized her as she approached, and, as usual, lifted his hat respectfully.

'I know you to be Mr. Smith, my former friend Stephen's father,' said Knight, directly he had scanned the embrowned and ruddy features of John.

'Yes, sir, I b'lieve I be.'

'How is your son now? I have only once heard from him since he went to India. I daresay you have heard him speak of me--Mr. Knight, who became acquainted with him some years ago in Exonbury.'

'Ay, that I have. Stephen is very well, thank you, sir, and he's in England; in fact, he's at home. In short, sir, he's down in the vault there, a-looking at the departed coffins.'

Elfride's heart fluttered like a butterfly.

Knight looked amazed. 'Well, that is extraordinary,' he murmured. 'Did he know I was in the parish?'

'I really can't say, sir,' said John, wishing himself out of the entanglement he rather suspected than thoroughly understood.

'Would it be considered an intrusion by the family if we went into the vault?'

'Oh, bless ye, no, sir; scores of folk have been stepping down. 'Tis left open a-purpose.'

'We will go down, Elfride.'

'I am afraid the air is close,' she said appealingly.

'Oh no, ma'am,' said John. 'We white-limed the walls and arches the day 'twas opened, as we always do, and again on the morning of the funeral; the place is as sweet as a granary.'

'Then I should like you to accompany me, Elfie; having originally sprung from the family too.'

'I don't like going where death is so emphatically present. I'll stay by the horses whilst you go in; they may get loose.'

'What nonsense! I had no idea your sentiments were so flimsily formed as to be perturbed by a few remnants of mortality; but stay out, if you are so afraid, by all means.'

'Oh no, I am not afraid; don't say that.'

She held miserably to his arm, thinking that, perhaps, the revelation might as well come at once as ten minutes later, for Stephen would be sure to accompany his friend to his horse.

At first, the gloom of the vault, which was lighted only by a couple of candles, was too great to admit of their seeing anything distinctly; but with a further advance Knight discerned, in front of the black masses lining the walls, a young man standing, and writing in a pocket-book.

Knight said one word: 'Stephen!'

Stephen Smith, not being in such absolute ignorance of Knight's whereabouts as Knight had been of Smith's instantly recognized his friend, and knew by rote the outlines of the fair woman standing behind him.

Stephen came forward and shook him by the hand, without speaking.

'Why have you not written, my boy?' said Knight, without in any way signifying Elfride's presence to Stephen. To the essayist, Smith was still the country lad whom he had patronized and tended; one to whom the formal presentation of a lady betrothed to himself would have seemed incongruous and absurd.

'Why haven't you written to me?' said Stephen.

'Ah, yes. Why haven't I? why haven't we? That's always the query which we cannot clearly answer without an unsatisfactory sense of our inadequacies. However, I have not forgotten you, Smith. And now we have met; and we must meet again, and have a longer chat than this can conveniently be. I must know all you have been doing. That you have thriven, I know, and you must teach me the way.'

Elfride stood in the background. Stephen had read the position at a glance, and immediately guessed that she had never mentioned his name

to Knight. His tact in avoiding catastrophes was the chief quality which made him intellectually respectable, in which quality he far transcended Knight; and he decided that a tranquil issue out of the encounter, without any harrowing of the feelings of either Knight or Elfride, was to be attempted if possible. His old sense of indebtedness to Knight had never wholly forsaken him; his love for Elfride was generous now.

As far as he dared look at her movements he saw that her bearing towards him would be dictated by his own towards her; and if he acted as a stranger she would do likewise as a means of deliverance. Circumstances favouring this course, it was desirable also to be rather reserved towards Knight, to shorten the meeting as much as possible.

'I am afraid that my time is almost too short to allow even of such a pleasure,' he said. 'I leave here to-morrow. And until I start for the Continent and India, which will be in a fortnight, I shall have hardly a moment to spare.'

Knight's disappointment and dissatisfied looks at this reply sent a pang through Stephen as great as any he had felt at the sight of Elfride. The words about shortness of time were literally true, but their tone was far from being so. He would have been gratified to talk with Knight as in past times, and saw as a dead loss to himself that, to save the woman who cared nothing for him, he was deliberately throwing away his friend.

'Oh, I am sorry to hear that,' said Knight, in a changed tone. 'But

of course, if you have weighty concerns to attend to, they must not be neglected. And if this is to be our first and last meeting, let me say that I wish you success with all my heart!' Knight's warmth revived towards the end; the solemn impressions he was beginning to receive from the scene around them abstracting from his heart as a puerility any momentary vexation at words. 'It is a strange place for us to meet in,' he continued, looking round the vault.

Stephen briefly assented, and there was a silence. The blackened coffins were now revealed more clearly than at first, the whitened walls and arches throwing them forward in strong relief. It was a scene which was remembered by all three as an indelible mark in their history. Knight, with an abstracted face, was standing between his companions, though a little in advance of them, Elfride being on his right hand, and Stephen Smith on his left. The white daylight on his right side gleamed faintly in, and was toned to a blueness by contrast with the yellow rays from the candle against the wall. Elfride, timidly shrinking back, and nearest the entrance, received most of the light therefrom, whilst Stephen was entirely in candlelight, and to him the spot of outer sky visible above the steps was as a steely blue patch, and nothing more.

'I have been here two or three times since it was opened,' said Stephen.

'My father was engaged in the work, you know.'

'Yes. What are you doing?' Knight inquired, looking at the note-book and pencil Stephen held in his hand.

'I have been sketching a few details in the church, and since then I have been copying the names from some of the coffins here. Before I left England I used to do a good deal of this sort of thing.'

'Yes; of course. Ah, that's poor Lady Luxellian, I suppose.' Knight pointed to a coffin of light satin-wood, which stood on the stone sleepers in the new niche. 'And the remainder of the family are on this side. Who are those two, so snug and close together?'

Stephen's voice altered slightly as he replied 'That's Lady Elfride Kingsmore--born Luxellian, and that is Arthur, her husband. I have heard my father say that they--he--ran away with her, and married her against the wish of her parents.'

'Then I imagine this to be where you got your Christian name, Miss Swancourt?' said Knight, turning to her. 'I think you told me it was three or four generations ago that your family branched off from the Luxellians?'

'She was my grandmother,' said Elfride, vainly endeavouring to moisten her dry lips before she spoke. Elfride had then the conscience-stricken look of Guido's Magdalen, rendered upon a more childlike form. She kept her face partially away from Knight and Stephen, and set her eyes upon the sky visible outside, as if her salvation depended upon quickly reaching it. Her left hand rested lightly within Knight's arm, half

withdrawn, from a sense of shame at claiming him before her old lover, yet unwilling to renounce him; so that her glove merely touched his sleeve. "Can one be pardoned, and retain the offence?" quoted Elfride's heart then.

Conversation seemed to have no self-sustaining power, and went on in the shape of disjointed remarks. 'One's mind gets thronged with thoughts while standing so solemnly here,' Knight said, in a measured quiet voice. 'How much has been said on death from time to time! how much we ourselves can think upon it! We may fancy each of these who lie here saying:

'For Thou, to make my fall more great,  
Didst lift me up on high.'

What comes next, Elfride? It is the Hundred-and-second Psalm I am thinking of.'

'Yes, I know it,' she murmured, and went on in a still lower voice, seemingly afraid for any words from the emotional side of her nature to reach Stephen:

"My days, just hastening to their end,



Are like an evening shade;  
My beauty doth, like wither'd grass,  
With waning lustre fade."

'Well,' said Knight musingly, 'let us leave them. Such occasions as these seem to compel us to roam outside ourselves, far away from the fragile frame we live in, and to expand till our perception grows so vast that our physical reality bears no sort of proportion to it. We look back upon the weak and minute stem on which this luxuriant growth depends, and ask, Can it be possible that such a capacity has a foundation so small? Must I again return to my daily walk in that narrow cell, a human body, where worldly thoughts can torture me? Do we not?'

'Yes,' said Stephen and Elfride.

'One has a sense of wrong, too, that such an appreciative breadth as a sentient being possesses should be committed to the frail casket of a body. What weakens one's intentions regarding the future like the thought of this?...However, let us tune ourselves to a more cheerful chord, for there's a great deal to be done yet by us all.'

As Knight meditatively addressed his juniors thus, unconscious of the deception practised, for different reasons, by the severed hearts at his side, and of the scenes that had in earlier days united them, each one felt that he and she did not gain by contrast with their musing mentor.

Physically not so handsome as either the youthful architect or the vicar's daughter, the thoroughness and integrity of Knight illuminated his features with a dignity not even incipient in the other two. It is difficult to frame rules which shall apply to both sexes, and Elfride, an undeveloped girl, must, perhaps, hardly be laden with the moral responsibilities which attach to a man in like circumstances. The charm of woman, too, lies partly in her subtleness in matters of love. But if honesty is a virtue in itself, Elfride, having none of it now, seemed, being for being, scarcely good enough for Knight. Stephen, though deceptive for no unworthy purpose, was deceptive after all; and whatever good results grace such strategy if it succeed, it seldom draws admiration, especially when it fails.

On an ordinary occasion, had Knight been even quite alone with Stephen, he would hardly have alluded to his possible relationship to Elfride. But moved by attendant circumstances Knight was impelled to be confiding.

'Stephen,' he said, 'this lady is Miss Swancourt. I am staying at her father's house, as you probably know.' He stepped a few paces nearer to Smith, and said in a lower tone: 'I may as well tell you that we are engaged to be married.'

Low as the words had been spoken, Elfride had heard them, and awaited Stephen's reply in breathless silence, if that could be called silence where Elfride's dress, at each throb of her heart, shook and indicated

it like a pulse-glass, rustling also against the wall in reply to the same throbbing. The ray of daylight which reached her face lent it a blue pallor in comparison with those of the other two.

'I congratulate you,' Stephen whispered; and said aloud, 'I know Miss Swancourt--a little. You must remember that my father is a parishioner of Mr. Swancourt's.'

'I thought you might possibly not have lived at home since they have been here.'

'I have never lived at home, certainly, since that time.'

'I have seen Mr. Smith,' faltered Elfride.

'Well, there is no excuse for me. As strangers to each other I ought, I suppose, to have introduced you: as acquaintances, I should not have stood so persistently between you. But the fact is, Smith, you seem a boy to me, even now.'

Stephen appeared to have a more than previous consciousness of the intense cruelty of his fate at the present moment. He could not repress the words, uttered with a dim bitterness:

'You should have said that I seemed still the rural mechanic's son I am, and hence an unfit subject for the ceremony of introductions.'

'Oh, no, no! I won't have that.' Knight endeavoured to give his reply a laughing tone in Elfride's ears, and an earnestness in Stephen's: in both which efforts he signally failed, and produced a forced speech pleasant to neither. 'Well, let us go into the open air again; Miss Swancourt, you are particularly silent. You mustn't mind Smith. I have known him for years, as I have told you.'

'Yes, you have,' she said.

'To think she has never mentioned her knowledge of me!' Smith murmured, and thought with some remorse how much her conduct resembled his own on his first arrival at her house as a stranger to the place.

They ascended to the daylight, Knight taking no further notice of Elfride's manner, which, as usual, he attributed to the natural shyness of a young woman at being discovered walking with him on terms which left not much doubt of their meaning. Elfride stepped a little in advance, and passed through the churchyard.

'You are changed very considerably, Smith,' said Knight, 'and I suppose it is no more than was to be expected. However, don't imagine that I shall feel any the less interest in you and your fortunes whenever you care to confide them to me. I have not forgotten the attachment you spoke of as your reason for going away to India. A London young lady,

was it not? I hope all is prosperous?'

'No: the match is broken off.'

It being always difficult to know whether to express sorrow or gladness under such circumstances--all depending upon the character of the match--Knight took shelter in the safe words: 'I trust it was for the best.'

'I hope it was. But I beg that you will not press me further: no, you have not pressed me--I don't mean that--but I would rather not speak upon the subject.'

Stephen's words were hurried.

Knight said no more, and they followed in the footsteps of Elfride, who still kept some paces in advance, and had not heard Knight's unconscious allusion to her. Stephen bade him adieu at the churchyard-gate without going outside, and watched whilst he and his sweetheart mounted their horses.

'Good heavens, Elfride,' Knight exclaimed, 'how pale you are! I suppose I ought not to have taken you into that vault. What is the matter?'

'Nothing,' said Elfride faintly. 'I shall be myself in a moment. All was so strange and unexpected down there, that it made me unwell.'

'I thought you said very little. Shall I get some water?'

'No, no.'

'Do you think it is safe for you to mount?'

'Quite--indeed it is,' she said, with a look of appeal.

'Now then--up she goes!' whispered Knight, and lifted her tenderly into the saddle.

Her old lover still looked on at the performance as he leant over the gate a dozen yards off. Once in the saddle, and having a firm grip of the reins, she turned her head as if by a resistless fascination, and for the first time since that memorable parting on the moor outside St. Launce's after the passionate attempt at marriage with him, Elfride looked in the face of the young man she first had loved. He was the youth who had called her his inseparable wife many a time, and whom she had even addressed as her husband. Their eyes met. Measurement of life should be proportioned rather to the intensity of the experience than to its actual length. Their glance, but a moment chronologically, was a season in their history. To Elfride the intense agony of reproach in Stephen's eye was a nail piercing her heart with a deadliness no words can describe. With a spasmodic effort she withdrew her eyes, urged on the horse, and in the chaos of perturbed memories was oblivious of any

presence beside her. The deed of deception was complete.

Gaining a knoll on which the park transformed itself into wood and copse, Knight came still closer to her side, and said, 'Are you better now, dearest?'

'Oh yes.' She pressed a hand to her eyes, as if to blot out the image of Stephen. A vivid scarlet spot now shone with preternatural brightness in the centre of each cheek, leaving the remainder of her face lily-white as before.

'Elfride,' said Knight, rather in his old tone of mentor, 'you know I don't for a moment chide you, but is there not a great deal of unwomanly weakness in your allowing yourself to be so overwhelmed by the sight of what, after all, is no novelty? Every woman worthy of the name should, I think, be able to look upon death with something like composure. Surely you think so too?'

'Yes; I own it.'

His obtuseness to the cause of her indisposition, by evidencing his entire freedom from the suspicion of anything behind the scenes, showed how incapable Knight was of deception himself, rather than any inherent dulness in him regarding human nature. This, clearly perceived by Elfride, added poignancy to her self-reproach, and she idolized him the more because of their difference. Even the recent sight of Stephen's

face and the sound of his voice, which for a moment had stirred a chord or two of ancient kindness, were unable to keep down the adoration re-existent now that he was again out of view.

She had replied to Knight's question hastily, and immediately went on to speak of indifferent subjects. After they had reached home she was apart from him till dinner-time. When dinner was over, and they were watching the dusk in the drawing-room, Knight stepped out upon the terrace. Elfride went after him very decisively, on the spur of a virtuous intention.

'Mr. Knight, I want to tell you something,' she said, with quiet firmness.

'And what is it about?' gaily returned her lover. 'Happiness, I hope. Do not let anything keep you so sad as you seem to have been to-day.'

'I cannot mention the matter until I tell you the whole substance of it,' she said. 'And that I will do to-morrow. I have been reminded of it to-day. It is about something I once did, and don't think I ought to have done.'

This, it must be said, was rather a mild way of referring to a frantic passion and flight, which, much or little in itself, only accident had saved from being a scandal in the public eye.



Knight thought the matter some trifle, and said pleasantly:

'Then I am not to hear the dreadful confession now?'

'No, not now. I did not mean to-night,' Elfride responded, with a slight decline in the firmness of her voice. 'It is not light as you think it--it troubles me a great deal.' Fearing now the effect of her own earnestness, she added forcedly, 'Though, perhaps, you may think it light after all.'

'But you have not said when it is to be?'

'To-morrow morning. Name a time, will you, and bind me to it? I want you to fix an hour, because I am weak, and may otherwise try to get out of it.' She added a little artificial laugh, which showed how timorous her resolution was still.

'Well, say after breakfast--at eleven o'clock.'

'Yes, eleven o'clock. I promise you. Bind me strictly to my word.'