

## Chapter XXVIII

'I lull a fancy, trouble-tost.'

Miss Swancourt, it is eleven o'clock.'

She was looking out of her dressing-room window on the first floor, and Knight was regarding her from the terrace balustrade, upon which he had been idly sitting for some time--dividing the glances of his eye between the pages of a book in his hand, the brilliant hues of the geraniums and calceolarias, and the open window above-mentioned.

'Yes, it is, I know. I am coming.'

He drew closer, and under the window.

'How are you this morning, Elfride? You look no better for your long night's rest.'

She appeared at the door shortly after, took his offered arm, and together they walked slowly down the gravel path leading to the river and away under the trees.

Her resolution, sustained during the last fifteen hours, had been to tell the whole truth, and now the moment had come.

Step by step they advanced, and still she did not speak. They were nearly at the end of the walk, when Knight broke the silence.

'Well, what is the confession, Elfride?'

She paused a moment, drew a long breath; and this is what she said:

'I told you one day--or rather I gave you to understand--what was not true. I fancy you thought me to mean I was nineteen my next birthday, but it was my last I was nineteen.'

The moment had been too much for her. Now that the crisis had come, no qualms of conscience, no love of honesty, no yearning to make a confidence and obtain forgiveness with a kiss, could string Elfride up to the venture. Her dread lest he should be unforgiving was heightened by the thought of yesterday's artifice, which might possibly add disgust to his disappointment. The certainty of one more day's affection, which she gained by silence, outvalued the hope of a perpetuity combined with the risk of all.

The trepidation caused by these thoughts on what she had intended to say shook so naturally the words she did say, that Knight never for a moment suspected them to be a last moment's substitution. He smiled and pressed her hand warmly.

'My dear Elfie--yes, you are now--no protestation--what a winning little woman you are, to be so absurdly scrupulous about a mere iota! Really, I never once have thought whether your nineteenth year was the last or the present. And, by George, well I may not; for it would never do for a staid fogey a dozen years older to stand upon such a trifle as that.'

'Don't praise me--don't praise me! Though I prize it from your lips, I don't deserve it now.'

But Knight, being in an exceptionally genial mood, merely saw this distressful exclamation as modesty. 'Well,' he added, after a minute, 'I like you all the better, you know, for such moral precision, although I called it absurd.' He went on with tender earnestness: 'For, Elfride, there is one thing I do love to see in a woman--that is, a soul truthful and clear as heaven's light. I could put up with anything if I had that--forgive nothing if I had it not. Elfride, you have such a soul, if ever woman had; and having it, retain it, and don't ever listen to the fashionable theories of the day about a woman's privileges and natural right to practise wiles. Depend upon it, my dear girl, that a noble woman must be as honest as a noble man. I specially mean by honesty, fairness not only in matters of business and social detail, but in all the delicate dealings of love, to which the licence given to your sex particularly refers.'

Elfride looked troublously at the trees.

'Now let us go on to the river, Elfie.'

'I would if I had a hat on,' she said with a sort of suppressed woe.

'I will get it for you,' said Knight, very willing to purchase her companionship at so cheap a price. 'You sit down there a minute.' And he turned and walked rapidly back to the house for the article in question.

Elfride sat down upon one of the rustic benches which adorned this portion of the grounds, and remained with her eyes upon the grass. She was induced to lift them by hearing the brush of light and irregular footsteps hard by. Passing along the path which intersected the one she was in and traversed the outer shrubberies, Elfride beheld the farmer's widow, Mrs. Jethway. Before she noticed Elfride, she paused to look at the house, portions of which were visible through the bushes. Elfride, shrinking back, hoped the unpleasant woman might go on without seeing her. But Mrs. Jethway, silently apostrophizing the house, with actions which seemed dictated by a half-overtaken reason, had discerned the girl, and immediately came up and stood in front of her.

'Ah, Miss Swancourt! Why did you disturb me? Mustn't I trespass here?'

'You may walk here if you like, Mrs. Jethway. I do not disturb you.'

'You disturb my mind, and my mind is my whole life; for my boy is there still, and he is gone from my body.'

'Yes, poor young man. I was sorry when he died.'

'Do you know what he died of?'

'Consumption.'

'Oh no, no!' said the widow. 'That word "consumption" covers a good deal. He died because you were his own well-agreed sweetheart, and then proved false--and it killed him. Yes, Miss Swancourt,' she said in an excited whisper, 'you killed my son!'

'How can you be so wicked and foolish!' replied Elfride, rising indignantly. But indignation was not natural to her, and having been so worn and harrowed by late events, she lost any powers of defence that mood might have lent her. 'I could not help his loving me, Mrs. Jethway!'

'That's just what you could have helped. You know how it began, Miss Elfride. Yes: you said you liked the name of Felix better than any other name in the parish, and you knew it was his name, and that those you said it to would report it to him.'

'I knew it was his name--of course I did; but I am sure, Mrs. Jethway, I did not intend anybody to tell him.'

'But you knew they would.'

'No, I didn't.'

'And then, after that, when you were riding on Revels-day by our house, and the lads were gathered there, and you wanted to dismount, when Jim Drake and George Upway and three or four more ran forward to hold your pony, and Felix stood back timid, why did you beckon to him, and say you would rather he held it?'

'O Mrs. Jethway, you do think so mistakenly! I liked him best--that's why I wanted him to do it. He was gentle and nice--I always thought him so--and I liked him.'

'Then why did you let him kiss you?'

'It is a falsehood; oh, it is, it is!' said Elfride, weeping with desperation. 'He came behind me, and attempted to kiss me; and that was why I told him never to let me see him again.'

'But you did not tell your father or anybody, as you would have if you had looked upon it then as the insult you now pretend it was.'

'He begged me not to tell, and foolishly enough I did not. And I wish I had now. I little expected to be scourged with my own kindness. Pray leave me, Mrs. Jethway.' The girl only expostulated now.

'Well, you harshly dismissed him, and he died. And before his body was cold, you took another to your heart. Then as carelessly sent him about his business, and took a third. And if you consider that nothing, Miss Swancourt,' she continued, drawing closer; 'it led on to what was very serious indeed. Have you forgotten the would-be runaway marriage? The journey to London, and the return the next day without being married, and that there's enough disgrace in that to ruin a woman's good name far less light than yours? You may have: I have not. Fickleness towards a lover is bad, but fickleness after playing the wife is wantonness.'

'Oh, it's a wicked cruel lie! Do not say it; oh, do not!'

'Does your new man know of it? I think not, or he would be no man of yours! As much of the story as was known is creeping about the neighbourhood even now; but I know more than any of them, and why should

I respect your love?'

'I defy you!' cried Elfride tempestuously. 'Do and say all you can to ruin me; try; put your tongue at work; I invite it! I defy you as a slanderous woman! Look, there he comes.' And her voice trembled greatly as she saw through the leaves the beloved form of Knight coming from the door with her hat in his hand. 'Tell him at once; I can bear it.'

'Not now,' said the woman, and disappeared down the path.

The excitement of her latter words had restored colour to Elfride's cheeks; and hastily wiping her eyes, she walked farther on, so that by the time her lover had overtaken her the traces of emotion had nearly disappeared from her face. Knight put the hat upon her head, took her hand, and drew it within his arm.

It was the last day but one previous to their departure for St. Leonards; and Knight seemed to have a purpose in being much in her company that day. They rambled along the valley. The season was that period in the autumn when the foliage alone of an ordinary plantation is rich enough in hues to exhaust the chromatic combinations of an artist's palette. Most lustrous of all are the beeches, graduating from bright rusty red at the extremity of the boughs to a bright yellow at their inner parts; young oaks are still of a neutral green; Scotch firs and hollies are nearly blue; whilst occasional dottings of other varieties give maroons and purples of every tinge.

The river--such as it was--here pursued its course amid flagstones as level as a pavement, but divided by crevices of irregular width. With the summer drought the torrent had narrowed till it was now but a thread of crystal clearness, meandering along a central channel in the rocky bed of the winter current. Knight scrambled through the bushes which at this point nearly covered the brook from sight, and leapt down upon the dry portion of the river bottom.



'Elfride, I never saw such a sight!' he exclaimed. 'The hazels overhang the river's course in a perfect arch, and the floor is beautifully paved. The place reminds one of the passages of a cloister. Let me help you down.'

He assisted her through the marginal underwood and down to the stones. They walked on together to a tiny cascade about a foot wide and high, and sat down beside it on the flags that for nine months in the year were submerged beneath a gushing bourne. From their feet trickled the attenuated thread of water which alone remained to tell the intent and reason of this leaf-covered aisle, and journeyed on in a zigzag line till lost in the shade.

Knight, leaning on his elbow, after contemplating all this, looked critically at Elfride.

'Does not such a luxuriant head of hair exhaust itself and get thin as the years go on from eighteen to eight-and-twenty?' he asked at length.

'Oh no!' she said quickly, with a visible disinclination to harbour such a thought, which came upon her with an unpleasantness whose force it would be difficult for men to understand. She added afterwards, with smouldering uneasiness, 'Do you really think that a great abundance of hair is more likely to get thin than a moderate quantity?'

'Yes, I really do. I believe--am almost sure, in fact--that if

statistics could be obtained on the subject, you would find the persons with thin hair were those who had a superabundance originally, and that those who start with a moderate quantity retain it without much loss.'

Elfride's troubles sat upon her face as well as in her heart. Perhaps to a woman it is almost as dreadful to think of losing her beauty as of losing her reputation. At any rate, she looked quite as gloomy as she had looked at any minute that day.

'You shouldn't be so troubled about a mere personal adornment,' said Knight, with some of the severity of tone that had been customary before she had beguiled him into softness.

'I think it is a woman's duty to be as beautiful as she can. If I were a scholar, I would give you chapter and verse for it from one of your own Latin authors. I know there is such a passage, for papa has alluded to it.'

"Munditiae, et ornatus, et cultus," &c.--is that it? A passage in Livy which is no defence at all.'

'No, it is not that.'

'Never mind, then; for I have a reason for not taking up my old cudgels against you, Elfie. Can you guess what the reason is?'

'No; but I am glad to hear it,' she said thankfully. 'For it is dreadful when you talk so. For whatever dreadful name the weakness may deserve, I must candidly own that I am terrified to think my hair may ever get thin.'

'Of course; a sensible woman would rather lose her wits than her beauty.'

'I don't care if you do say satire and judge me cruelly. I know my hair is beautiful; everybody says so.'

'Why, my dear Miss Swancourt,' he tenderly replied, 'I have not said anything against it. But you know what is said about handsome being and handsome doing.'

'Poor Miss Handsome-does cuts but a sorry figure beside Miss Handsome-is in every man's eyes, your own not excepted, Mr. Knight, though it pleases you to throw off so,' said Elfride saucily. And lowering her voice: 'You ought not to have taken so much trouble to save me from falling over the cliff, for you don't think mine a life worth much trouble evidently.'

'Perhaps you think mine was not worth yours.'

'It was worth anybody's!'

Her hand was plashing in the little waterfall, and her eyes were bent the same way.

'You talk about my severity with you, Elfride. You are unkind to me, you know.'

'How?' she asked, looking up from her idle occupation.

'After my taking trouble to get jewellery to please you, you wouldn't accept it.'

'Perhaps I would now; perhaps I want to.'

'Do!' said Knight.

And the packet was withdrawn from his pocket and presented the third time. Elfride took it with delight. The obstacle was rent in twain, and the significant gift was hers.

'I'll take out these ugly ones at once,' she exclaimed, 'and I'll wear yours--shall I?'

'I should be gratified.'

Now, though it may seem unlikely, considering how far the two had gone in converse, Knight had never yet ventured to kiss Elfride. Far slower

was he than Stephen Smith in matters like that. The utmost advance he had made in such demonstrations had been to the degree witnessed by Stephen in the summer-house. So Elfride's cheek being still forbidden fruit to him, he said impulsively.

'Elfie, I should like to touch that seductive ear of yours. Those are my gifts; so let me dress you in them.'

She hesitated with a stimulating hesitation.

'Let me put just one in its place, then?'

Her face grew much warmer.

'I don't think it would be quite the usual or proper course,' she said, suddenly turning and resuming her operation of plashing in the miniature cataract.

The stillness of things was disturbed by a bird coming to the streamlet to drink. After watching him dip his bill, sprinkle himself, and fly into a tree, Knight replied, with the courteous brusqueness she so much liked to hear--

'Elfride, now you may as well be fair. You would mind my doing it but little, I think; so give me leave, do.'

'I will be fair, then,' she said confidently, and looking him full in the face. It was a particular pleasure to her to be able to do a little honesty without fear. 'I should not mind your doing so--I should like such an attention. My thought was, would it be right to let you?'

'Then I will!' he rejoined, with that singular earnestness about a small matter--in the eyes of a ladies' man but a momentary peg for flirtation or jest--which is only found in deep natures who have been wholly unused to toying with womankind, and which, from its unwontedness, is in itself a tribute the most precious that can be rendered, and homage the most exquisite to be received.

'And you shall,' she whispered, without reserve, and no longer mistress of the ceremonies. And then Elfride inclined herself towards him, thrust back her hair, and poised her head sideways. In doing this her arm and shoulder necessarily rested against his breast.

At the touch, the sensation of both seemed to be concentrated at the point of contact. All the time he was performing the delicate manoeuvre Knight trembled like a young surgeon in his first operation.

'Now the other,' said Knight in a whisper.

'No, no.'

'Why not?'

'I don't know exactly.'

'You must know.'

'Your touch agitates me so. Let us go home.'

'Don't say that, Elfride. What is it, after all? A mere nothing. Now turn round, dearest.'

She was powerless to disobey, and turned forthwith; and then, without any defined intention in either's mind, his face and hers drew closer together; and he supported her there, and kissed her.

Knight was at once the most ardent and the coolest man alive. When his emotions slumbered he appeared almost phlegmatic; when they were moved he was no less than passionate. And now, without having quite intended an early marriage, he put the question plainly. It came with all the ardour which was the accumulation of long years behind a natural reserve.

'Elfride, when shall we be married?'

The words were sweet to her; but there was a bitter in the sweet. These newly-overt acts of his, which had culminated in this plain question, coming on the very day of Mrs. Jethway's blasting reproaches, painted

distinctly her fickleness as an enormity. Loving him in secret had not seemed such thorough-going inconstancy as the same love recognized and acted upon in the face of threats. Her distraction was interpreted by him at her side as the outward signs of an unwonted experience.

'I don't press you for an answer now, darling,' he said, seeing she was not likely to give a lucid reply. 'Take your time.'

Knight was as honourable a man as was ever loved and deluded by woman. It may be said that his blindness in love proved the point, for shrewdness in love usually goes with meanness in general. Once the passion had mastered him, the intellect had gone for naught. Knight, as a lover, was more single-minded and far simpler than his friend Stephen, who in other capacities was shallow beside him.

Without saying more on the subject of their marriage, Knight held her at arm's length, as if she had been a large bouquet, and looked at her with critical affection.

'Does your pretty gift become me?' she inquired, with tears of excitement on the fringes of her eyes.

'Undoubtedly, perfectly!' said her lover, adopting a lighter tone to put her at her ease. 'Ah, you should see them; you look shinier than ever. Fancy that I have been able to improve you!'



'Am I really so nice? I am glad for your sake. I wish I could see myself.'

'You can't. You must wait till we get home.'

'I shall never be able,' she said, laughing. 'Look: here's a way.'

'So there is. Well done, woman's wit!'

'Hold me steady!'

'Oh yes.'

'And don't let me fall, will you?'

'By no means.'

Below their seat the thread of water paused to spread out into a smooth small pool. Knight supported her whilst she knelt down and leant over it.

'I can see myself. Really, try as religiously as I will, I cannot help admiring my appearance in them.'

'Doubtless. How can you be so fond of finery? I believe you are corrupting me into a taste for it. I used to hate every such thing

before I knew you.'

'I like ornaments, because I want people to admire what you possess, and envy you, and say, "I wish I was he."'

'I suppose I ought not to object after that. And how much longer are you going to look in there at yourself?'

'Until you are tired of holding me? Oh, I want to ask you something.'

And she turned round. 'Now tell truly, won't you? What colour of hair do you like best now?'

Knight did not answer at the moment.

'Say light, do!' she whispered coaxingly. 'Don't say dark, as you did that time.'

'Light-brown, then. Exactly the colour of my sweetheart's.'

'Really?' said Elfride, enjoying as truth what she knew to be flattery.

'Yes.'

'And blue eyes, too, not hazel? Say yes, say yes!'

'One recantation is enough for to-day.'

'No, no.'

'Very well, blue eyes.' And Knight laughed, and drew her close and kissed her the second time, which operations he performed with the carefulness of a fruiterer touching a bunch of grapes so as not to disturb their bloom.

Elfride objected to a second, and flung away her face, the movement causing a slight disarrangement of hat and hair. Hardly thinking what she said in the trepidation of the moment, she exclaimed, clapping her hand to her ear--

'Ah, we must be careful! I lost the other earring doing like this.'

No sooner did she realise the significant words than a troubled look passed across her face, and she shut her lips as if to keep them back.

'Doing like what?' said Knight, perplexed.

'Oh, sitting down out of doors,' she replied hastily.