

## Chapter XXX

'Vassal unto Love.'

Elfride clung closer to Knight as day succeeded day. Whatever else might admit of question, there could be no dispute that the allegiance she bore him absorbed her whole soul and existence. A greater than Stephen had arisen, and she had left all to follow him.

The unreserved girl was never chary of letting her lover discover how much she admired him. She never once held an idea in opposition to any one of his, or insisted on any point with him, or showed any independence, or held her own on any subject. His lightest whim she respected and obeyed as law, and if, expressing her opinion on a matter, he took up the subject and differed from her, she instantly threw down her own opinion as wrong and untenable. Even her ambiguities and espieglerie were but media of the same manifestation; acted charades, embodying the words of her prototype, the tender and susceptible daughter-in-law of Naomi: 'Let me find favour in thy sight, my lord; for that thou hast comforted me, and for that thou hast spoken friendly unto thine handmaid.'

She was syringing the plants one wet day in the greenhouse. Knight was sitting under a great passion-flower observing the scene. Sometimes he looked out at the rain from the sky, and then at Elfride's inner rain of

larger drops, which fell from trees and shrubs, after having previously hung from the twigs like small silver fruit.

'I must give you something to make you think of me during this autumn at your chambers,' she was saying. 'What shall it be? Portraits do more harm than good, by selecting the worst expression of which your face is capable. Hair is unlucky. And you don't like jewellery.'

'Something which shall bring back to my mind the many scenes we have enacted in this conservatory. I see what I should prize very much. That dwarf myrtle tree in the pot, which you have been so carefully tending.'

Elfride looked thoughtfully at the myrtle.

'I can carry it comfortably in my hat box,' said Knight. 'And I will put it in my window, and so, it being always before my eyes, I shall think of you continually.'

It so happened that the myrtle which Knight had singled out had a peculiar beginning and history. It had originally been a twig worn in Stephen Smith's button-hole, and he had taken it thence, stuck it into the pot, and told her that if it grew, she was to take care of it, and keep it in remembrance of him when he was far away.

She looked wistfully at the plant, and a sense of fairness to Smith's memory caused her a pang of regret that Knight should have asked for

that very one. It seemed exceeding a common heartlessness to let it go.

'Is there not anything you like better?' she said sadly. 'That is only an ordinary myrtle.'

'No: I am fond of myrtle.' Seeing that she did not take kindly to the idea, he said again, 'Why do you object to my having that?'

'Oh no--I don't object precisely--it was a feeling.--Ah, here's another cutting lately struck, and just as small--of a better kind, and with prettier leaves--myrtus microphylla.'

'That will do nicely. Let it be put in my room, that I may not forget it. What romance attaches to the other?'

'It was a gift to me.'

The subject then dropped. Knight thought no more of the matter till, on entering his bedroom in the evening, he found the second myrtle placed upon his dressing-table as he had directed. He stood for a moment admiring the fresh appearance of the leaves by candlelight, and then he thought of the transaction of the day.

Male lovers as well as female can be spoilt by too much kindness, and Elfride's uniform submissiveness had given Knight a rather exacting manner at crises, attached to her as he was. 'Why should she have

refused the one I first chose?' he now asked himself. Even such slight opposition as she had shown then was exceptional enough to make itself noticeable. He was not vexed with her in the least: the mere variation of her way to-day from her usual ways kept him musing on the subject, because it perplexed him. 'It was a gift'--those were her words.

Admitting it to be a gift, he thought she could hardly value a mere friend more than she valued him as a lover, and giving the plant into his charge would have made no difference. 'Except, indeed, it was the gift of a lover,' he murmured.

'I wonder if Elfride has ever had a lover before?' he said aloud, as a new idea, quite. This and companion thoughts were enough to occupy him completely till he fell asleep--rather later than usual.

The next day, when they were again alone, he said to her rather suddenly--

'Do you love me more or less, Elfie, for what I told you on board the steamer?'

'You told me so many things,' she returned, lifting her eyes to his and smiling.

'I mean the confession you coaxed out of me--that I had never been in the position of lover before.'

'It is a satisfaction, I suppose, to be the first in your heart,' she said to him, with an attempt to continue her smiling.

'I am going to ask you a question now,' said Knight, somewhat awkwardly. 'I only ask it in a whimsical way, you know: not with great seriousness, Elfride. You may think it odd, perhaps.'

Elfride tried desperately to keep the colour in her face. She could not, though distressed to think that getting pale showed consciousness of deeper guilt than merely getting red.

'Oh no--I shall not think that,' she said, because obliged to say something to fill the pause which followed her questioner's remark.

'It is this: have you ever had a lover? I am almost sure you have not; but, have you?'

'Not, as it were, a lover; I mean, not worth mentioning, Harry,' she faltered.

Knight, overstrained in sentiment as he knew the feeling to be, felt some sickness of heart.

'Still, he was a lover?'

'Well, a sort of lover, I suppose,' she responded tardily.

'A man, I mean, you know.'

'Yes; but only a mere person, and----'

'But truly your lover?'

'Yes; a lover certainly--he was that. Yes, he might have been called my lover.'

Knight said nothing to this for a minute or more, and kept silent time with his finger to the tick of the old library clock, in which room the colloquy was going on.

'You don't mind, Harry, do you?' she said anxiously, nestling close to him, and watching his face.

'Of course, I don't seriously mind. In reason, a man cannot object to such a trifle. I only thought you hadn't--that was all.'

However, one ray was abstracted from the glory about her head. But afterwards, when Knight was wandering by himself over the bare and breezy hills, and meditating on the subject, that ray suddenly returned. For she might have had a lover, and never have cared in the least for him. She might have used the word improperly, and meant 'admirer' all the time. Of course she had been admired; and one man might have made

his admiration more prominent than that of the rest--a very natural case.

They were sitting on one of the garden seats when he found occasion to put the supposition to the test. 'Did you love that lover or admirer of yours ever so little, Elfie?'

She murmured reluctantly, 'Yes, I think I did.'

Knight felt the same faint touch of misery. 'Only a very little?' he said.

'I am not sure how much.'

'But you are sure, darling, you loved him a little?'

'I think I am sure I loved him a little.'

'And not a great deal, Elfie?'

'My love was not supported by reverence for his powers.'

'But, Elfride, did you love him deeply?' said Knight restlessly.

'I don't exactly know how deep you mean by deeply.'

'That's nonsense.'

'You misapprehend; and you have let go my hand!' she cried, her eyes filling with tears. 'Harry, don't be severe with me, and don't question me. I did not love him as I do you. And could it be deeply if I did not think him cleverer than myself? For I did not. You grieve me so much--you can't think.'

'I will not say another word about it.'

'And you will not think about it, either, will you? I know you think of weaknesses in me after I am out of your sight; and not knowing what they are, I cannot combat them. I almost wish you were of a grosser nature, Harry; in truth I do! Or rather, I wish I could have the advantages such a nature in you would afford me, and yet have you as you are.'

'What advantages would they be?'

'Less anxiety, and more security. Ordinary men are not so delicate in their tastes as you; and where the lover or husband is not fastidious, and refined, and of a deep nature, things seem to go on better, I fancy--as far as I have been able to observe the world.'

'Yes; I suppose it is right. Shallowness has this advantage, that you can't be drowned there.'

'But I think I'll have you as you are; yes, I will!' she said winsomely.

'The practical husbands and wives who take things philosophically are very humdrum, are they not? Yes, it would kill me quite. You please me best as you are.'

'Even though I wish you had never cared for one before me?'

'Yes. And you must not wish it. Don't!'

'I'll try not to, Elfride.'

So she hoped, but her heart was troubled. If he felt so deeply on this point, what would he say did he know all, and see it as Mrs. Jethway saw it? He would never make her the happiest girl in the world by taking her to be his own for aye. The thought enclosed her as a tomb whenever it presented itself to her perturbed brain. She tried to believe that Mrs. Jethway would never do her such a cruel wrong as to increase the bad appearance of her folly by innuendoes; and concluded that concealment, having been begun, must be persisted in, if possible. For what he might consider as bad as the fact, was her previous concealment of it by strategy.

But Elfride knew Mrs. Jethway to be her enemy, and to hate her. It was possible she would do her worst. And should she do it, all might be over.

Would the woman listen to reason, and be persuaded not to ruin one who had never intentionally harmed her?

It was night in the valley between Endelstow Crag and the shore. The brook which trickled that way to the sea was distinct in its murmurs now, and over the line of its course there began to hang a white riband of fog. Against the sky, on the left hand of the vale, the black form of the church could be seen. On the other rose hazel-bushes, a few trees, and where these were absent, furze tufts--as tall as men--on stems nearly as stout as timber. The shriek of some bird was occasionally heard, as it flew terror-stricken from its first roost, to seek a new sleeping-place, where it might pass the night unmolested.

In the evening shade, some way down the valley, and under a row of scrubby oaks, a cottage could still be discerned. It stood absolutely alone. The house was rather large, and the windows of some of the rooms were nailed up with boards on the outside, which gave a particularly deserted appearance to the whole erection. From the front door an irregular series of rough and misshapen steps, cut in the solid rock, led down to the edge of the streamlet, which, at their extremity, was hollowed into a basin through which the water trickled. This was evidently the means of water supply to the dweller or dwellers in the cottage.

A light footstep was heard descending from the higher slopes of the hillside. Indistinct in the pathway appeared a moving female shape, who advanced and knocked timidly at the door. No answer being returned the knock was repeated, with the same result, and it was then repeated a third time. This also was unsuccessful.

From one of the only two windows on the ground floor which were not boarded up came rays of light, no shutter or curtain obscuring the room from the eyes of a passer on the outside. So few walked that way after nightfall that any such means to secure secrecy were probably deemed unnecessary.

The inequality of the rays falling upon the trees outside told that the light had its origin in a flickering fire only. The visitor, after the third knocking, stepped a little to the left in order to gain a view of the interior, and threw back the hood from her face. The dancing yellow sheen revealed the fair and anxious countenance of Elfride.

Inside the house this firelight was enough to illumine the room distinctly, and to show that the furniture of the cottage was superior to what might have been expected from so unpromising an exterior. It also showed to Elfride that the room was empty. Beyond the light quiver and flap of the flames nothing moved or was audible therein.

She turned the handle and entered, throwing off the cloak which enveloped her, under which she appeared without hat or bonnet, and

in the sort of half-toilette country people ordinarily dine in. Then advancing to the foot of the staircase she called distinctly, but somewhat fearfully, 'Mrs. Jethway!'

No answer.

With a look of relief and regret combined, denoting that ease came to the heart and disappointment to the brain, Elfride paused for several minutes, as if undecided how to act. Determining to wait, she sat down on a chair. The minutes drew on, and after sitting on the thorns of impatience for half an hour, she searched her pocket, took therefrom a letter, and tore off the blank leaf. Then taking out a pencil she wrote upon the paper:

'DEAR MRS. JETHWAY,--I have been to visit you. I wanted much to see you, but I cannot wait any longer. I came to beg you not to execute the threats you have repeated to me. Do not, I beseech you, Mrs. Jethway, let any one know I ran away from home! It would ruin me with him, and break my heart. I will do anything for you, if you will be kind to me. In the name of our common womanhood, do not, I implore you, make a scandal of me.--Yours, E. SWANCOURT.'

She folded the note cornerwise, directed it, and placed it on the table. Then again drawing the hood over her curly head she emerged silently as

she had come.

Whilst this episode had been in action at Mrs. Jethway's cottage, Knight had gone from the dining-room into the drawing-room, and found Mrs. Swancourt there alone.

'Elfride has vanished upstairs or somewhere,' she said.

'And I have been reading an article in an old number of the PRESENT that I lighted on by chance a short time ago; it is an article you once told us was yours. Well, Harry, with due deference to your literary powers, allow me to say that this effusion is all nonsense, in my opinion.'

'What is it about?' said Knight, taking up the paper and reading.

'There: don't get red about it. Own that experience has taught you to be more charitable. I have never read such unchivalrous sentiments in my life--from a man, I mean. There, I forgive you; it was before you knew Elfride.'

'Oh yes,' said Knight, looking up. 'I remember now. The text of that sermon was not my own at all, but was suggested to me by a young man named Smith--the same whom I have mentioned to you as coming from this parish. I thought the idea rather ingenious at the time, and enlarged it to the weight of a few guineas, because I had nothing else in my head.'

'Which idea do you call the text? I am curious to know that.'

'Well, this,' said Knight, somewhat unwillingly. 'That experience teaches, and your sweetheart, no less than your tailor, is necessarily very imperfect in her duties, if you are her first patron: and conversely, the sweetheart who is graceful under the initial kiss must be supposed to have had some practice in the trade.'

'And do you mean to say that you wrote that upon the strength of another man's remark, without having tested it by practice?'

'Yes--indeed I do.'

'Then I think it was uncalled for and unfair. And how do you know it is true? I expect you regret it now.'

'Since you bring me into a serious mood, I will speak candidly. I do believe that remark to be perfectly true, and, having written it, I would defend it anywhere. But I do often regret having ever written it, as well as others of the sort. I have grown older since, and I find such a tone of writing is calculated to do harm in the world. Every literary Jack becomes a gentleman if he can only pen a few indifferent satires upon womankind: women themselves, too, have taken to the trick; and so, upon the whole, I begin to be rather ashamed of my companions.'

'Ah, Henry, you have fallen in love since and it makes a difference,'

said Mrs. Swancourt with a faint tone of banter.

'That's true; but that is not my reason.'

'Having found that, in a case of your own experience, a so-called goose was a swan, it seems absurd to deny such a possibility in other men's experiences.'

'You can hit palpably, cousin Charlotte,' said Knight. 'You are like the boy who puts a stone inside his snowball, and I shall play with you no longer. Excuse me--I am going for my evening stroll.'

Though Knight had spoken jestingly, this incident and conversation had caused him a sudden depression. Coming, rather singularly, just after his discovery that Elfride had known what it was to love warmly before she had known him, his mind dwelt upon the subject, and the familiar pipe he smoked, whilst pacing up and down the shrubbery-path, failed to be a solace. He thought again of those idle words--hitherto quite forgotten--about the first kiss of a girl, and the theory seemed more than reasonable. Of course their sting now lay in their bearing on Elfride.

Elfride, under Knight's kiss, had certainly been a very different woman from herself under Stephen's. Whether for good or for ill, she had marvellously well learnt a betrothed lady's part; and the fascinating finish of her deportment in this second campaign did probably arise from

her unreserved encouragement of Stephen. Knight, with all the rapidity of jealous sensitiveness, pounced upon some words she had inadvertently let fall about an earring, which he had only partially understood at the time. It was during that 'initial kiss' by the little waterfall:

'We must be careful. I lost the other by doing this!'

A flush which had in it as much of wounded pride as of sorrow, passed over Knight as he thought of what he had so frequently said to her in his simplicity. 'I always meant to be the first comer in a woman's heart, fresh lips or none for me.' How childishly blind he must have seemed to this mere girl! How she must have laughed at him inwardly! He absolutely writhed as he thought of the confession she had wrung from him on the boat in the darkness of night. The one conception which had sustained his dignity when drawn out of his shell on that occasion--that of her charming ignorance of all such matters--how absurd it was!

This man, whose imagination had been fed up to preternatural size by lonely study and silent observations of his kind--whose emotions had been drawn out long and delicate by his seclusion, like plants in a cellar--was now absolutely in pain. Moreover, several years of poetic study, and, if the truth must be told, poetic efforts, had tended to develop the affective side of his constitution still further, in proportion to his active faculties. It was his belief in the absolute newness of blandishment to Elfride which had constituted her primary charm. He began to think it was as hard to be earliest in a woman's

heart as it was to be first in the Pool of Bethesda.

That Knight should have been thus constituted: that Elfride's second lover should not have been one of the great mass of bustling mankind, little given to introspection, whose good-nature might have compensated for any lack of appreciativeness, was the chance of things. That her throbbing, self-confounding, indiscreet heart should have to defend itself unaided against the keen scrutiny and logical power which Knight, now that his suspicions were awakened, would sooner or later be sure to exercise against her, was her misfortune. A miserable incongruity was apparent in the circumstance of a strong mind practising its unerring archery upon a heart which the owner of that mind loved better than his own.

Elfride's docile devotion to Knight was now its own enemy. Clinging to him so dependently, she taught him in time to presume upon that devotion--a lesson men are not slow to learn. A slight rebelliousness occasionally would have done him no harm, and would have been a world of advantage to her. But she idolized him, and was proud to be his bond-servant.