

## Chapter XXXI

'A worm i' the bud.'

One day the reviewer said, 'Let us go to the cliffs again, Elfride;' and, without consulting her wishes, he moved as if to start at once.

'The cliff of our dreadful adventure?' she inquired, with a shudder.

'Death stares me in the face in the person of that cliff.'

Nevertheless, so entirely had she sunk her individuality in his that the remark was not uttered as an expostulation, and she immediately prepared to accompany him.

'No, not that place,' said Knight. 'It is ghastly to me, too. That other, I mean; what is its name?--Windy Beak.'

Windy Beak was the second cliff in height along that coast, and, as is frequently the case with the natural features of the globe no less than with the intellectual features of men, it enjoyed the reputation of being the first. Moreover, it was the cliff to which Elfride had ridden with Stephen Smith, on a well-remembered morning of his summer visit.

So, though thought of the former cliff had caused her to shudder at the perils to which her lover and herself had there been exposed, by being

associated with Knight only it was not so objectionable as Windy Beak. That place was worse than gloomy, it was a perpetual reproach to her.

But not liking to refuse, she said, 'It is further than the other cliff.'

'Yes; but you can ride.'

'And will you too?'

'No, I'll walk.'

A duplicate of her original arrangement with Stephen. Some fatality must be hanging over her head. But she ceased objecting.

'Very well, Harry, I'll ride,' she said meekly.

A quarter of an hour later she was in the saddle. But how different the mood from that of the former time. She had, indeed, given up her position as queen of the less to be vassal of the greater. Here was no showing off now; no scampering out of sight with Pansy, to perplex and tire her companion; no saucy remarks on LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI.

Elfride was burdened with the very intensity of her love.

Knight did most of the talking along the journey. Elfride silently

listened, and entirely resigned herself to the motions of the ambling horse upon which she sat, alternately rising and sinking gently, like a sea bird upon a sea wave.

When they had reached the limit of a quadruped's possibilities in walking, Knight tenderly lifted her from the saddle, tied the horse, and rambled on with her to the seat in the rock. Knight sat down, and drew Elfride deftly beside him, and they looked over the sea.

Two or three degrees above that melancholy and eternally level line, the ocean horizon, hung a sun of brass, with no visible rays, in a sky of ashen hue. It was a sky the sun did not illuminate or enkindle, as is usual at sunsets. This sheet of sky was met by the salt mass of gray water, flecked here and there with white. A waft of dampness occasionally rose to their faces, which was probably rarefied spray from the blows of the sea upon the foot of the cliff.

Elfride wished it could be a longer time ago that she had sat there with Stephen as her lover, and agreed to be his wife. The significant closeness of that time to the present was another item to add to the list of passionate fears which were chronic with her now.

Yet Knight was very tender this evening, and sustained her close to him as they sat.

Not a word had been uttered by either since sitting down, when Knight

said musingly, looking still afar--

'I wonder if any lovers in past years ever sat here with arms locked, as we do now. Probably they have, for the place seems formed for a seat.'

Her recollection of a well-known pair who had, and the much-talked-of loss which had ensued therefrom, and how the young man had been sent back to look for the missing article, led Elfride to glance down to her side, and behind her back. Many people who lose a trinket involuntarily give a momentary look for it in passing the spot ever so long afterwards. They do not often find it. Elfride, in turning her head, saw something shine weakly from a crevice in the rocky sedile. Only for a few minutes during the day did the sun light the alcove to its innermost rifts and slits, but these were the minutes now, and its level rays did Elfride the good or evil turn of revealing the lost ornament.

Elfride's thoughts instantly reverted to the words she had unintentionally uttered upon what had been going on when the earring was lost. And she was immediately seized with a misgiving that Knight, on seeing the object, would be reminded of her words. Her instinctive act therefore was to secure it privately.

It was so deep in the crack that Elfride could not pull it out with her hand, though she made several surreptitious trials.

'What are you doing, Elfie?' said Knight, noticing her attempts, and

looking behind him likewise.

She had relinquished the endeavour, but too late.

Knight peered into the joint from which her hand had been withdrawn, and saw what she had seen. He instantly took a penknife from his pocket, and by dint of probing and scraping brought the earring out upon open ground.

'It is not yours, surely?' he inquired.

'Yes, it is,' she said quietly.

'Well, that is a most extraordinary thing, that we should find it like this!' Knight then remembered more circumstances; 'What, is it the one you have told me of?'

'Yes.'

The unfortunate remark of hers at the kiss came into his mind, if eyes were ever an index to be trusted. Trying to repress the words he yet spoke on the subject, more to obtain assurance that what it had seemed to imply was not true than from a wish to pry into by-gones.

'Were you really engaged to be married to that lover?' he said, looking straight forward at the sea again.

'Yes--but not exactly. Yet I think I was.'

'O Elfride, engaged to be married!' he murmured.

'It would have been called a--secret engagement, I suppose. But don't look so disappointed; don't blame me.'

'No, no.'

'Why do you say "No, no," in such a way? Sweetly enough, but so barely?'

Knight made no direct reply to this. 'Elfride, I told you once,' he said, following out his thoughts, 'that I never kissed a woman as a sweetheart until I kissed you. A kiss is not much, I suppose, and it happens to few young people to be able to avoid all blandishments and attentions except from the one they afterwards marry. But I have peculiar weaknesses, Elfride; and because I have led a peculiar life, I must suffer for it, I suppose. I had hoped--well, what I had no right to hope in connection with you. You naturally granted your former lover the privileges you grant me.'

A 'yes' came from her like the last sad whisper of a breeze.

'And he used to kiss you--of course he did.'

'Yes.'

'And perhaps you allowed him a more free manner in his love-making than I have shown in mine.'

'No, I did not.' This was rather more alertly spoken.

'But he adopted it without being allowed?'

'Yes.'

'How much I have made of you, Elfride, and how I have kept aloof!' said Knight in deep and shaken tones. 'So many days and hours as I have hoped in you--I have feared to kiss you more than those two times. And he made no scruples to...'

She crept closer to him and trembled as if with cold. Her dread that the whole story, with random additions, would become known to him, caused her manner to be so agitated that Knight was alarmed and perplexed into stillness. The actual innocence which made her think so fearfully of what, as the world goes, was not a great matter, magnified her apparent guilt. It may have said to Knight that a woman who was so flurried in the preliminaries must have a dreadful sequel to her tale.

'I know,' continued Knight, with an indescribable drag of manner and intonation,--'I know I am absurdly scrupulous about you--that I want you

too exclusively mine. In your past before you knew me--from your very cradle--I wanted to think you had been mine. I would make you mine by main force. Elfride,' he went on vehemently, 'I can't help this jealousy over you! It is my nature, and must be so, and I HATE the fact that you have been caressed before: yes hate it!'

She drew a long deep breath, which was half a sob. Knight's face was hard, and he never looked at her at all, still fixing his gaze far out to sea, which the sun had now resigned to the shade. In high places it is not long from sunset to night, dusk being in a measure banished, and though only evening where they sat, it had been twilight in the valleys for half an hour. Upon the dull expanse of sea there gradually intensified itself into existence the gleam of a distant light-ship.

'When that lover first kissed you, Elfride was it in such a place as this?'

'Yes, it was.'

'You don't tell me anything but what I wring out of you. Why is that? Why have you suppressed all mention of this when casual confidences of mine should have suggested confidence in return? On board the Juliet, why were you so secret? It seems like being made a fool of, Elfride, to think that, when I was teaching you how desirable it was that we should have no secrets from each other, you were assenting in words, but in act contradicting me. Confidence would have been so much more promising for



our happiness. If you had had confidence in me, and told me willingly, I should--be different. But you suppress everything, and I shall question you. Did you live at Endelstow at that time?'

'Yes,' she said faintly.

'Where were you when he first kissed you?'

'Sitting in this seat.'

'Ah, I thought so!' said Knight, rising and facing her.

'And that accounts for everything--the exclamation which you explained deceitfully, and all! Forgive the harsh word, Elfride--forgive it.' He smiled a surface smile as he continued: 'What a poor mortal I am to play second fiddle in everything and to be deluded by fibs!'

'Oh, don't say it; don't, Harry!'

'Where did he kiss you besides here?'

'Sitting on--a tomb in the--churchyard--and other places,' she answered with slow recklessness.

'Never mind, never mind,' he exclaimed, on seeing her tears and perturbation. 'I don't want to grieve you. I don't care.'

But Knight did care.

'It makes no difference, you know,' he continued, seeing she did not reply.

'I feel cold,' said Elfride. 'Shall we go home?'

'Yes; it is late in the year to sit long out of doors: we ought to be off this ledge before it gets too dark to let us see our footing. I daresay the horse is impatient.'

Knight spoke the merest commonplace to her now. He had hoped to the last moment that she would have volunteered the whole story of her first attachment. It grew more and more distasteful to him that she should have a secret of this nature. Such entire confidence as he had pictured as about to exist between himself and the innocent young wife who had known no lover's tones save his--was this its beginning? He lifted her upon the horse, and they went along constrainedly. The poison of suspicion was doing its work well.

An incident occurred on this homeward journey which was long remembered

by both, as adding shade to shadow. Knight could not keep from his mind the words of Adam's reproach to Eve in PARADISE LOST, and at last whispered them to himself--

'Fool'd and beguiled: by him thou, I by thee!'

'What did you say?' Elfride inquired timorously.

'It was only a quotation.'

They had now dropped into a hollow, and the church tower made its appearance against the pale evening sky, its lower part being hidden by some intervening trees. Elfride, being denied an answer, was looking at the tower and trying to think of some contrasting quotation she might use to regain his tenderness. After a little thought she said in winning tones--

"Thou hast been my hope, and a strong tower for me against the enemy."

They passed on. A few minutes later three or four birds were seen to fly out of the tower.

'The strong tower moves,' said Knight, with surprise.

A corner of the square mass swayed forward, sank, and vanished. A loud rumble followed, and a cloud of dust arose where all had previously been so clear.

'The church restorers have done it!' said Elfride.

At this minute Mr. Swancourt was seen approaching them. He came up with a bustling demeanour, apparently much engrossed by some business in hand.

'We have got the tower down!' he exclaimed. 'It came rather quicker than we intended it should. The first idea was to take it down stone by stone, you know. In doing this the crack widened considerably, and it was not believed safe for the men to stand upon the walls any longer. Then we decided to undermine it, and three men set to work at the weakest corner this afternoon. They had left off for the evening, intending to give the final blow to-morrow morning, and had been home about half an hour, when down it came. A very successful job--a very fine job indeed. But he was a tough old fellow in spite of the crack.' Here Mr. Swancourt wiped from his face the perspiration his excitement had caused him.

'Poor old tower!' said Elfride.

'Yes, I am sorry for it,' said Knight. 'It was an interesting piece of antiquity--a local record of local art.'

'Ah, but my dear sir, we shall have a new one, expostulated Mr. Swancourt; 'a splendid tower--designed by a first-rate London man--in

the newest style of Gothic art, and full of Christian feeling.'

'Indeed!' said Knight.

'Oh yes. Not in the barbarous clumsy architecture of this neighbourhood; you see nothing so rough and pagan anywhere else in England. When the men are gone, I would advise you to go and see the church before anything further is done to it. You can now sit in the chancel, and look down the nave through the west arch, and through that far out to sea. In fact,' said Mr. Swancourt significantly, 'if a wedding were performed at the altar to-morrow morning, it might be witnessed from the deck of a ship on a voyage to the South Seas, with a good glass. However, after dinner, when the moon has risen, go up and see for yourselves.'

Knight assented with feverish readiness. He had decided within the last few minutes that he could not rest another night without further talk with Elfride upon the subject which now divided them: he was determined to know all, and relieve his disquiet in some way. Elfride would gladly have escaped further converse alone with him that night, but it seemed inevitable.

Just after moonrise they left the house. How little any expectation of the moonlight prospect--which was the ostensible reason of their pilgrimage--had to do with Knight's real motive in getting the gentle girl again upon his arm, Elfride no less than himself well knew.

