

Chapter XXXII

'Had I wist before I kist'

It was now October, and the night air was chill. After looking to see that she was well wrapped up, Knight took her along the hillside path they had ascended so many times in each other's company, when doubt was a thing unknown. On reaching the church they found that one side of the tower was, as the vicar had stated, entirely removed, and lying in the shape of rubbish at their feet. The tower on its eastern side still was firm, and might have withstood the shock of storms and the siege of battering years for many a generation even now. They entered by the side-door, went eastward, and sat down by the altar-steps.

The heavy arch spanning the junction of tower and nave formed to-night a black frame to a distant misty view, stretching far westward. Just outside the arch came the heap of fallen stones, then a portion of moonlit churchyard, then the wide and convex sea behind. It was a coup-d'oeil which had never been possible since the mediaeval masons first attached the old tower to the older church it dignified, and hence must be supposed to have had an interest apart from that of simple moonlight on ancient wall and sea and shore--any mention of which has by this time, it is to be feared, become one of the cuckoo-cries which are heard but not regarded. Rays of crimson, blue, and purple shone upon the twain from the east window behind them, wherein saints and angels vied

with each other in primitive surroundings of landscape and sky, and threw upon the pavement at the sitters' feet a softer reproduction of the same translucent hues, amid which the shadows of the two living heads of Knight and Elfride were opaque and prominent blots. Presently the moon became covered by a cloud, and the iridescence died away.

'There, it is gone!' said Knight. 'I've been thinking, Elfride, that this place we sit on is where we may hope to kneel together soon. But I am restless and uneasy, and you know why.'

Before she replied the moonlight returned again, irradiating that portion of churchyard within their view. It brightened the near part first, and against the background which the cloud-shadow had not yet uncovered stood, brightest of all, a white tomb--the tomb of young Jethway.

Knight, still alive on the subject of Elfride's secret, thought of her words concerning the kiss that it once had occurred on a tomb in this churchyard.

'Elfride,' he said, with a superficial archness which did not half cover an undercurrent of reproach, 'do you know, I think you might have told me voluntarily about that past--of kisses and betrothing--without giving me so much uneasiness and trouble. Was that the tomb you alluded to as having sat on with him?'

She waited an instant. 'Yes,' she said.

The correctness of his random shot startled Knight; though, considering that almost all the other memorials in the churchyard were upright headstones upon which nobody could possibly sit, it was not so wonderful.

Elfride did not even now go on with the explanation her exacting lover wished to have, and her reticence began to irritate him as before. He was inclined to read her a lecture.

'Why don't you tell me all?' he said somewhat indignantly. 'Elfride, there is not a single subject upon which I feel more strongly than upon this--that everything ought to be cleared up between two persons before they become husband and wife. See how desirable and wise such a course is, in order to avoid disagreeable contingencies in the form of discoveries afterwards. For, Elfride, a secret of no importance at all may be made the basis of some fatal misunderstanding only because it is discovered, and not confessed. They say there never was a couple of whom one had not some secret the other never knew or was intended to know. This may or may not be true; but if it be true, some have been happy in spite rather than in consequence of it. If a man were to see another man looking significantly at his wife, and she were blushing crimson and appearing startled, do you think he would be so well satisfied with, for instance, her truthful explanation that once, to her great annoyance, she accidentally fainted into his arms, as if she had said it

voluntarily long ago, before the circumstance occurred which forced it from her? Suppose that admirer you spoke of in connection with the tomb yonder should turn up, and bother me. It would embitter our lives, if I were then half in the dark, as I am now!

Knight spoke the latter sentences with growing force.

'It cannot be,' she said.

'Why not?' he asked sharply.

Elfride was distressed to find him in so stern a mood, and she trembled. In a confusion of ideas, probably not intending a wilful prevarication, she answered hurriedly--

'If he's dead, how can you meet him?'

'Is he dead? Oh, that's different altogether!' said Knight, immensely relieved. 'But, let me see--what did you say about that tomb and him?'

'That's his tomb,' she continued faintly.

'What! was he who lies buried there the man who was your lover?' Knight asked in a distinct voice.

'Yes; and I didn't love him or encourage him.'

'But you let him kiss you--you said so, you know, Elfride.'

She made no reply.

'Why,' said Knight, recollecting circumstances by degrees, 'you surely said you were in some degree engaged to him--and of course you were if he kissed you. And now you say you never encouraged him. And I have been fancying you said--I am almost sure you did--that you were sitting with him ON that tomb. Good God!' he cried, suddenly starting up in anger, 'are you telling me untruths? Why should you play with me like this? I'll have the right of it. Elfride, we shall never be happy! There's a blight upon us, or me, or you, and it must be cleared off before we marry.' Knight moved away impetuously as if to leave her.

She jumped up and clutched his arm

'Don't go, Harry--don't!

'Tell me, then,' said Knight sternly. 'And remember this, no more fibs, or, upon my soul, I shall hate you. Heavens! that I should come to this, to be made a fool of by a girl's untruths----'

'Don't, don't treat me so cruelly! O Harry, Harry, have pity, and withdraw those dreadful words! I am truthful by nature--I am--and I don't know how I came to make you misunderstand! But I was frightened!'

She quivered so in her perturbation that she shook him with her {Note:
sentence incomplete in text.}

'Did you say you were sitting on that tomb?' he asked moodily.

'Yes; and it was true.'

'Then how, in the name of Heaven, can a man sit upon his own tomb?'

'That was another man. Forgive me, Harry, won't you?'

'What, a lover in the tomb and a lover on it?'

'Oh--Oh--yes!'

'Then there were two before me?'

'I--suppose so.'

'Now, don't be a silly woman with your supposing--I hate all that,' said Knight contemptuously almost. 'Well, we learn strange things. I don't know what I might have done--no man can say into what shape circumstances may warp him--but I hardly think I should have had the conscience to accept the favours of a new lover whilst sitting over the poor remains of the old one; upon my soul, I don't.' Knight, in moody meditation, continued looking towards the tomb, which stood staring them

in the face like an avenging ghost.

'But you wrong me--Oh, so grievously!' she cried. 'I did not meditate any such thing: believe me, Harry, I did not. It only happened so--quite of itself.'

'Well, I suppose you didn't INTEND such a thing,' he said. 'Nobody ever does,' he sadly continued.

'And him in the grave I never once loved.'

'I suppose the second lover and you, as you sat there, vowed to be faithful to each other for ever?'

Elfride only replied by quick heavy breaths, showing she was on the brink of a sob.

'You don't choose to be anything but reserved, then?' he said imperatively.

'Of course we did,' she responded.

""Of course!" You seem to treat the subject very lightly?'

'It is past, and is nothing to us now.'

'Elfride, it is a nothing which, though it may make a careless man laugh, cannot but make a genuine one grieve. It is a very gnawing pain. Tell me straight through--all of it.'

'Never. O Harry! how can you expect it when so little of it makes you so harsh with me?'

'Now, Elfride, listen to this. You know that what you have told only jars the subtler fancies in one, after all. The feeling I have about it would be called, and is, mere sentimentality; and I don't want you to suppose that an ordinary previous engagement of a straightforward kind would make any practical difference in my love, or my wish to make you my wife. But you seem to have more to tell, and that's where the wrong is. Is there more?'

'Not much more,' she wearily answered.

Knight preserved a grave silence for a minute. "'Not much more,'" he said at last. 'I should think not, indeed!' His voice assumed a low and steady pitch. 'Elfride, you must not mind my saying a strange-sounding thing, for say it I shall. It is this: that if there WERE much more to add to an account which already includes all the particulars that a broken marriage engagement could possibly include with propriety, it must be some exceptional thing which might make it impossible for me or any one else to love you and marry you.'

Knights' disturbed mood led him much further than he would have gone in a quieter moment. And, even as it was, had she been assertive to any degree he would not have been so peremptory; and had she been a stronger character--more practical and less imaginative--she would have made more use of her position in his heart to influence him. But the confiding tenderness which had won him is ever accompanied by a sort of self-committal to the stream of events, leading every such woman to trust more to the kindness of fate for good results than to any argument of her own.

'Well, well,' he murmured cynically; 'I won't say it is your fault: it is my ill-luck, I suppose. I had no real right to question you--everybody would say it was presuming. But when we have misunderstood, we feel injured by the subject of our misunderstanding. You never said you had had nobody else here making love to you, so why should I blame you? Elfrida, I beg your pardon.'

'No, no! I would rather have your anger than that cool aggrieved politeness. Do drop that, Harry! Why should you inflict that upon me? It reduces me to the level of a mere acquaintance.'

'You do that with me. Why not confidence for confidence?'

'Yes; but I didn't ask you a single question with regard to your past: I didn't wish to know about it. All I cared for was that, wherever you came from, whatever you had done, whoever you had loved, you were mine

at last. Harry, if originally you had known I had loved, would you never have cared for me?'

'I won't quite say that. Though I own that the idea of your inexperienced state had a great charm for me. But I think this: that if I had known there was any phase of your past love you would refuse to reveal if I asked to know it, I should never have loved you.'

Elfride sobbed bitterly. 'Am I such a--mere characterless toy--as to have no attrac--tion in me, apart from--freshness? Haven't I brains? You said--I was clever and ingenious in my thoughts, and--isn't that anything? Have I not some beauty? I think I have a little--and I know I have--yes, I do! You have praised my voice, and my manner, and my accomplishments. Yet all these together are so much rubbish because I--accidentally saw a man before you!'

'Oh, come, Elfride. "Accidentally saw a man" is very cool. You loved him, remember.'

--'And loved him a little!'

'And refuse now to answer the simple question how it ended. Do you refuse still, Elfride?'

'You have no right to question me so--you said so. It is unfair. Trust me as I trust you.'

'That's not at all.'

'I shall not love you if you are so cruel. It is cruel to me to argue like this.'

'Perhaps it is. Yes, it is. I was carried away by my feeling for you. Heaven knows that I didn't mean to; but I have loved you so that I have used you badly.'

'I don't mind it, Harry!' she instantly answered, creeping up and nestling against him; 'and I will not think at all that you used me harshly if you will forgive me, and not be vexed with me any more? I do wish I had been exactly as you thought I was, but I could not help it, you know. If I had only known you had been coming, what a nunnery I would have lived in to have been good enough for you!'

'Well, never mind,' said Knight; and he turned to go. He endeavoured to speak sportively as they went on. 'Diogenes Laertius says that philosophers used voluntarily to deprive themselves of sight to be uninterrupted in their meditations. Men, becoming lovers, ought to do the same thing.'

'Why?--but never mind--I don't want to know. Don't speak laconically to me,' she said with deprecation.

'Why? Because they would never then be distracted by discovering their idol was second-hand.'

She looked down and sighed; and they passed out of the crumbling old place, and slowly crossed to the churchyard entrance. Knight was not himself, and he could not pretend to be. She had not told all.

He supported her lightly over the stile, and was practically as attentive as a lover could be. But there had passed away a glory, and the dream was not as it had been of yore. Perhaps Knight was not shaped by Nature for a marrying man. Perhaps his lifelong constraint towards women, which he had attributed to accident, was not chance after all, but the natural result of instinctive acts so minute as to be undiscernible even by himself. Or whether the rough dispelling of any bright illusion, however imaginative, depreciates the real and unexaggerated brightness which appertains to its basis, one cannot say. Certain it was that Knight's disappointment at finding himself second or third in the field, at Elfride's momentary equivoque, and at her reluctance to be candid, brought him to the verge of cynicism.