

Chapter XXXIII

'O daughter of Babylon, wasted with misery.'

A habit of Knight's, when not immediately occupied with Elfride--to walk by himself for half an hour or so between dinner and bedtime--had become familiar to his friends at Endelstow, Elfride herself among them. When he had helped her over the stile, she said gently, 'If you wish to take your usual turn on the hill, Harry, I can run down to the house alone.'

'Thank you, Elfie; then I think I will.'

Her form diminished to blackness in the moonlight, and Knight, after remaining upon the churchyard stile a few minutes longer, turned back again towards the building. His usual course was now to light a cigar or pipe, and indulge in a quiet meditation. But to-night his mind was too tense to bethink itself of such a solace. He merely walked round to the site of the fallen tower, and sat himself down upon some of the large stones which had composed it until this day, when the chain of circumstance originated by Stephen Smith, while in the employ of Mr. Hewby, the London man of art, had brought about its overthrow.

Pondering on the possible episodes of Elfride's past life, and on how he had supposed her to have had no past justifying the name, he sat and regarded the white tomb of young Jethway, now close in front of him.

The sea, though comparatively placid, could as usual be heard from this point along the whole distance between promontories to the right and left, floundering and entangling itself among the insulated stacks of rock which dotted the water's edge--the miserable skeletons of tortured old cliffs that would not even yet succumb to the wear and tear of the tides.

As a change from thoughts not of a very cheerful kind, Knight attempted exertion. He stood up, and prepared to ascend to the summit of the ruinous heap of stones, from which a more extended outlook was obtainable than from the ground. He stretched out his arm to seize the projecting arris of a larger block than ordinary, and so help himself up, when his hand lighted plump upon a substance differing in the greatest possible degree from what he had expected to seize--hard stone. It was stringy and entangled, and trailed upon the stone. The deep shadow from the aisle wall prevented his seeing anything here distinctly, and he began guessing as a necessity. 'It is a tressy species of moss or lichen,' he said to himself.

But it lay loosely over the stone.

'It is a tuft of grass,' he said.

But it lacked the roughness and humidity of the finest grass.

'It is a mason's whitewash-brush.'

Such brushes, he remembered, were more bristly; and however much used in

repairing a structure, would not be required in pulling one down.

He said, 'It must be a thready silk fringe.'

He felt further in. It was somewhat warm. Knight instantly felt somewhat cold.

To find the coldness of inanimate matter where you expect warmth is startling enough; but a colder temperature than that of the body being rather the rule than the exception in common substances, it hardly conveys such a shock to the system as finding warmth where utter frigidity is anticipated.

'God only knows what it is,' he said.

He felt further, and in the course of a minute put his hand upon a human head. The head was warm, but motionless. The thready mass was the hair of the head--long and straggling, showing that the head was a woman's.

Knight in his perplexity stood still for a moment, and collected his thoughts. The vicar's account of the fall of the tower was that the workmen had been undermining it all the day, and had left in the evening intending to give the finishing stroke the next morning. Half an hour

after they had gone the undermined angle came down. The woman who was half buried, as it seemed, must have been beneath it at the moment of the fall.

Knight leapt up and began endeavouring to remove the rubbish with his hands. The heap overlying the body was for the most part fine and dusty, but in immense quantity. It would be a saving of time to run for assistance. He crossed to the churchyard wall, and hastened down the hill.

A little way down an intersecting road passed over a small ridge, which now showed up darkly against the moon, and this road here formed a kind of notch in the sky-line. At the moment that Knight arrived at the crossing he beheld a man on this eminence, coming towards him. Knight turned aside and met the stranger.

'There has been an accident at the church,' said Knight, without preface. 'The tower has fallen on somebody, who has been lying there ever since. Will you come and help?'

'That I will,' said the man.

'It is a woman,' said Knight, as they hurried back, 'and I think we two are enough to extricate her. Do you know of a shovel?'

'The grave-digging shovels are about somewhere. They used to stay in the

tower.'

'And there must be some belonging to the workmen.'

They searched about, and in an angle of the porch found three carefully stowed away. Going round to the west end Knight signified the spot of the tragedy.

'We ought to have brought a lantern,' he exclaimed. 'But we may be able to do without.' He set to work removing the superincumbent mass.

The other man, who looked on somewhat helplessly at first, now followed the example of Knight's activity, and removed the larger stones which were mingled with the rubbish. But with all their efforts it was quite ten minutes before the body of the unfortunate creature could be extricated. They lifted her as carefully as they could, breathlessly carried her to Felix Jethway's tomb, which was only a few steps westward, and laid her thereon.

'Is she dead indeed?' said the stranger.

'She appears to be,' said Knight. 'Which is the nearest house? The vicarage, I suppose.'

'Yes; but since we shall have to call a surgeon from Castle Boterel, I think it would be better to carry her in that direction, instead of away

from the town.'

'And is it not much further to the first house we come to going that way, than to the vicarage or to The Craggs?'

'Not much,' the stranger replied.

'Suppose we take her there, then. And I think the best way to do it would be thus, if you don't mind joining hands with me.'

'Not in the least; I am glad to assist.'

Making a kind of cradle, by clasping their hands crosswise under the inanimate woman, they lifted her, and walked on side by side down a path indicated by the stranger, who appeared to know the locality well.

'I had been sitting in the church for nearly an hour,' Knight resumed, when they were out of the churchyard. 'Afterwards I walked round to the site of the fallen tower, and so found her. It is painful to think I unconsciously wasted so much time in the very presence of a perishing, flying soul.'

'The tower fell at dusk, did it not? quite two hours ago, I think?'

'Yes. She must have been there alone. What could have been her object in visiting the churchyard then?'

'It is difficult to say.' The stranger looked inquiringly into the reclining face of the motionless form they bore. 'Would you turn her round for a moment, so that the light shines on her face?' he said.

They turned her face to the moon, and the man looked closer into her features. 'Why, I know her!' he exclaimed.

'Who is she?'

'Mrs. Jethway. And the cottage we are taking her to is her own. She is a widow; and I was speaking to her only this afternoon. I was at Castle Boterel post-office, and she came there to post a letter. Poor soul! Let us hurry on.'

'Hold my wrist a little tighter. Was not that tomb we laid her on the tomb of her only son?'

'Yes, it was. Yes, I see it now. She was there to visit the tomb. Since the death of that son she has been a desolate, desponding woman, always bewailing him. She was a farmer's wife, very well educated--a governess originally, I believe.'

Knight's heart was moved to sympathy. His own fortunes seemed in some strange way to be interwoven with those of this Jethway family, through the influence of Elfride over himself and the unfortunate son of that

house. He made no reply, and they still walked on.

'She begins to feel heavy,' said the stranger, breaking the silence.

'Yes, she does,' said Knight; and after another pause added, 'I think I have met you before, though where I cannot recollect. May I ask who you are?'

'Oh yes. I am Lord Luxellian. Who are you?'

'I am a visitor at The Crag--Mr. Knight.'

'I have heard of you, Mr. Knight.'

'And I of you, Lord Luxellian. I am glad to meet you.'

'I may say the same. I am familiar with your name in print.'

'And I with yours. Is this the house?'

'Yes.'

The door was locked. Knight, reflecting a moment, searched the pocket of the lifeless woman, and found therein a large key which, on being applied to the door, opened it easily. The fire was out, but the moonlight entered the quarried window, and made patterns upon the floor.

The rays enabled them to see that the room into which they had entered was pretty well furnished, it being the same room that Elfride had visited alone two or three evenings earlier. They deposited their still burden on an old-fashioned couch which stood against the wall, and Knight searched about for a lamp or candle. He found a candle on a shelf, lighted it, and placed it on the table.

Both Knight and Lord Luxellian examined the pale countenance attentively, and both were nearly convinced that there was no hope. No marks of violence were visible in the casual examination they made.

'I think that as I know where Doctor Granson lives,' said Lord Luxellian, 'I had better run for him whilst you stay here.'

Knight agreed to this. Lord Luxellian then went off, and his hurrying footsteps died away. Knight continued bending over the body, and a few minutes longer of careful scrutiny perfectly satisfied him that the woman was far beyond the reach of the lancet and the drug. Her extremities were already beginning to get stiff and cold. Knight covered her face, and sat down.

The minutes went by. The essayist remained musing on all the occurrences of the night. His eyes were directed upon the table, and he had seen for some time that writing-materials were spread upon it. He now noticed these more particularly: there were an inkstand, pen, blotting-book, and note-paper. Several sheets of paper were thrust aside from the rest,

upon which letters had been begun and relinquished, as if their form had not been satisfactory to the writer. A stick of black sealing-wax and seal were there too, as if the ordinary fastening had not been considered sufficiently secure. The abandoned sheets of paper lying as they did open upon the table, made it possible, as he sat, to read the few words written on each. One ran thus:

'SIR,--As a woman who was once blest with a dear son of her own, I implore you to accept a warning----'

Another:

'SIR,--If you will deign to receive warning from a stranger before it is too late to alter your course, listen to----'

The third:

'SIR,--With this letter I enclose to you another which, unaided by any explanation from me, tells a startling tale. I wish, however, to add a few words to make your delusion yet more clear to you----'

It was plain that, after these renounced beginnings, a fourth letter had been written and despatched, which had been deemed a proper one. Upon the table were two drops of sealing-wax, the stick from which they were taken having been laid down overhanging the edge of the table; the end of it drooped, showing that the wax was placed there whilst warm.

There was the chair in which the writer had sat, the impression of the letter's address upon the blotting-paper, and the poor widow who had caused these results lying dead hard by. Knight had seen enough to lead him to the conclusion that Mrs. Jethway, having matter of great importance to communicate to some friend or acquaintance, had written him a very careful letter, and gone herself to post it; that she had not returned to the house from that time of leaving it till Lord Luxellian and himself had brought her back dead.

The unutterable melancholy of the whole scene, as he waited on, silent and alone, did not altogether clash with the mood of Knight, even though he was the affianced of a fair and winning girl, and though so lately he had been in her company. Whilst sitting on the remains of the demolished tower he had defined a new sensation; that the lengthened course of inaction he had lately been indulging in on Elfride's account might probably not be good for him as a man who had work to do. It could quickly be put an end to by hastening on his marriage with her.

Knight, in his own opinion, was one who had missed his mark by excessive

aiming. Having now, to a great extent, given up ideal ambitions, he wished earnestly to direct his powers into a more practical channel, and thus correct the introspective tendencies which had never brought himself much happiness, or done his fellow-creatures any great good. To make a start in this new direction by marriage, which, since knowing Elfride, had been so entrancing an idea, was less exquisite to-night. That the curtailment of his illusion regarding her had something to do with the reaction, and with the return of his old sentiments on wasting time, is more than probable. Though Knight's heart had so greatly mastered him, the mastery was not so complete as to be easily maintained in the face of a moderate intellectual revival.

His reverie was broken by the sound of wheels, and a horse's tramp. The door opened to admit the surgeon, Lord Luxellian, and a Mr. Coole, coroner for the division (who had been attending at Castle Boterel that very day, and was having an after-dinner chat with the doctor when Lord Luxellian arrived); next came two female nurses and some idlers.

Mr. Granson, after a cursory examination, pronounced the woman dead from suffocation, induced by intense pressure on the respiratory organs; and arrangements were made that the inquiry should take place on the following morning, before the return of the coroner to St. Launce's.

Shortly afterwards the house of the widow was deserted by all its living occupants, and she abode in death, as she had in her life during the

past two years, entirely alone.