

Chapter XXXIV

'Yea, happy shall he be that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us.'

Sixteen hours had passed. Knight was entering the ladies' boudoir at The Crag, upon his return from attending the inquest touching the death of Mrs. Jethway. Elfride was not in the apartment.

Mrs. Swancourt made a few inquiries concerning the verdict and collateral circumstances. Then she said--

'The postman came this morning the minute after you left the house. There was only one letter for you, and I have it here.'

She took a letter from the lid of her workbox, and handed it to him. Knight took the missive abstractedly, but struck by its appearance murmured a few words and left the room.

The letter was fastened with a black seal, and the handwriting in which it was addressed had lain under his eyes, long and prominently, only the evening before.

Knight was greatly agitated, and looked about for a spot where he might be secure from interruption. It was the season of heavy dews, which lay on the herbage in shady places all the day long; nevertheless, he

entered a small patch of neglected grass-plot enclosed by the shrubbery, and there perused the letter, which he had opened on his way thither.

The handwriting, the seal, the paper, the introductory words, all had told on the instant that the letter had come to him from the hands of the widow Jethway, now dead and cold. He had instantly understood that the unfinished notes which caught his eye yesternight were intended for nobody but himself. He had remembered some of the words of Elfride in her sleep on the steamer, that somebody was not to tell him of something, or it would be her ruin--a circumstance hitherto deemed so trivial and meaningless that he had well-nigh forgotten it. All these things infused into him an emotion intense in power and supremely distressing in quality. The paper in his hand quivered as he read:

'THE VALLEY, ENDELSTOW.

'SIR,--A woman who has not much in the world to lose by any censure this act may bring upon her, wishes to give you some hints concerning a lady you love. If you will deign to accept a warning before it is too late, you will notice what your correspondent has to say.

'You are deceived. Can such a woman as this be worthy?

'One who encouraged an honest youth to love her, then slighted him, so that he died.

'One who next took a man of no birth as a lover, who was forbidden the house by her father.

'One who secretly left her home to be married to that man, met him, and went with him to London.

'One who, for some reason or other, returned again unmarried.

'One who, in her after-correspondence with him, went so far as to address him as her husband.

'One who wrote the enclosed letter to ask me, who better than anybody else knows the story, to keep the scandal a secret.

'I hope soon to be beyond the reach of either blame or praise. But before removing me God has put it in my power to avenge the death of my son.

'GERTRUDE JETHWAY.'

The letter enclosed was the note in pencil that Elfride had written in Mrs. Jethway's cottage:

'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.

Knight turned his head wearily towards the house. The ground rose rapidly on nearing the shrubbery in which he stood, raising it almost to a level with the first floor of The Crag. Elfride's dressing-room lay in the salient angle in this direction, and it was lighted by two windows in such a position that, from Knight's standing-place, his sight passed through both windows, and raked the room. Elfride was there; she was pausing between the two windows, looking at her figure in the cheval-glass. She regarded herself long and attentively in front; turned, flung back her head, and observed the reflection over her shoulder.

Nobody can predicate as to her object or fancy; she may have done the deed in the very abstraction of deep sadness. She may have been moaning from the bottom of her heart, 'How unhappy am I!' But the impression produced on Knight was not a good one. He dropped his eyes moodily. The

dead woman's letter had a virtue in the accident of its juncture far beyond any it intrinsically exhibited. Circumstance lent to evil words a ring of pitiless justice echoing from the grave. Knight could not endure their possession. He tore the letter into fragments.

He heard a brushing among the bushes behind, and turning his head he saw

Elfride following him. The fair girl looked in his face with a wistful smile of hope, too forcedly hopeful to displace the firmly established dread beneath it. His severe words of the previous night still sat heavy upon her.

'I saw you from my window, Harry,' she said timidly.

'The dew will make your feet wet,' he observed, as one deaf.

'I don't mind it.'

'There is danger in getting wet feet.'

'Yes...Harry, what is the matter?'

'Oh, nothing. Shall I resume the serious conversation I had with you last night? No, perhaps not; perhaps I had better not.'

'Oh, I cannot tell! How wretched it all is! Ah, I wish you were your own

dear self again, and had kissed me when I came up! Why didn't you ask me for one? why don't you now?'

'Too free in manner by half,' he heard murmur the voice within him.

'It was that hateful conversation last night,' she went on. 'Oh, those words! Last night was a black night for me.'

'Kiss!--I hate that word! Don't talk of kissing, for God's sake! I should think you might with advantage have shown tact enough to keep back that word "kiss," considering those you have accepted.'

She became very pale, and a rigid and desolate character took possession of her face. That face was so delicate and tender in appearance now, that one could fancy the pressure of a finger upon it would cause a livid spot.

Knight walked on, and Elfride with him, silent and unopposing. He opened a gate, and they entered a path across a stubble-field.

'Perhaps I intrude upon you?' she said as he closed the gate. 'Shall I go away?'

'No. Listen to me, Elfride.' Knight's voice was low and unequal.

'I have been honest with you: will you be so with me? If any--strange--connection has existed between yourself and a predecessor

of mine, tell it now. It is better that I know it now, even though the knowledge should part us, than that I should discover it in time to come. And suspicions have been awakened in me. I think I will not say how, because I despise the means. A discovery of any mystery of your past would embitter our lives.'

Knight waited with a slow manner of calmness. His eyes were sad and imperative. They went farther along the path.

'Will you forgive me if I tell you all?' she exclaimed entreatingly.

'I can't promise; so much depends upon what you have to tell.'

Elfride could not endure the silence which followed.

'Are you not going to love me?' she burst out. 'Harry, Harry, love me, and speak as usual! Do; I beseech you, Harry!'

'Are you going to act fairly by me?' said Knight, with rising anger; 'or are you not? What have I done to you that I should be put off like this? Be caught like a bird in a springe; everything intended to be hidden from me! Why is it, Elfride? That's what I ask you.'

In their agitation they had left the path, and were wandering among the wet and obstructive stubble, without knowing or heeding it.

'What have I done?' she faltered.

'What? How can you ask what, when you know so well? You KNOW that I have

designedly been kept in ignorance of something attaching to you, which, had I known of it, might have altered all my conduct; and yet you say, what?'

She drooped visibly, and made no answer.

'Not that I believe in malicious letter-writers and whisperers; not I.

I don't know whether I do or don't: upon my soul, I can't tell. I know this: a religion was building itself upon you in my heart. I looked into your eyes, and thought I saw there truth and innocence as pure and perfect as ever embodied by God in the flesh of woman. Perfect truth is too much to expect, but ordinary truth I WILL HAVE or nothing at all. Just say, then; is the matter you keep back of the gravest importance, or is it not?'

'I don't understand all your meaning. If I have hidden anything from you, it has been because I loved you so, and I feared--feared--to lose you.'

'Since you are not given to confidence, I want to ask you some plain questions. Have I your permission?'

'Yes,' she said, and there came over her face a weary resignation. 'Say the harshest words you can; I will bear them!'

'There is a scandal in the air concerning you, Elfride; and I cannot even combat it without knowing definitely what it is. It may not refer to you entirely, or even at all.' Knight trifled in the very bitterness of his feeling. 'In the time of the French Revolution, Pariseau, a ballet-master, was beheaded by mistake for Parisot, a captain of the King's Guard. I wish there was another "E. Swancourt" in the neighbourhood. Look at this.'

He handed her the letter she had written and left on the table at Mrs. Jethway's. She looked over it vacantly.

'It is not so much as it seems!' she pleaded. 'It seems wickedly deceptive to look at now, but it had a much more natural origin than you think. My sole wish was not to endanger our love. O Harry! that was all my idea. It was not much harm.'

'Yes, yes; but independently of the poor miserable creature's remarks, it seems to imply--something wrong.'

'What remarks?'

'Those she wrote me--now torn to pieces. Elfride, DID you run away with a man you loved?--that was the damnable statement. Has such an

accusation life in it--really, truly, Elfride?

'Yes,' she whispered.

Knight's countenance sank. 'To be married to him?' came huskily from his lips.

'Yes. Oh, forgive me! I had never seen you, Harry.'

'To London?'

'Yes; but I----'

'Answer my questions; say nothing else, Elfride Did you ever deliberately try to marry him in secret?'

'No; not deliberately.'

'But did you do it?'

A feeble red passed over her face.

'Yes,' she said.

'And after that--did you--write to him as your husband; and did he address you as his wife?'

'Listen, listen! It was----'

'Do answer me; only answer me!'

'Then, yes, we did.' Her lips shook; but it was with some little dignity that she continued: 'I would gladly have told you; for I knew and know I had done wrong. But I dared not; I loved you too well. Oh, so well! You have been everything in the world to me--and you are now. Will you not forgive me?'

It is a melancholy thought, that men who at first will not allow the verdict of perfection they pronounce upon their sweethearts or wives to be disturbed by God's own testimony to the contrary, will, once suspecting their purity, morally hang them upon evidence they would be ashamed to admit in judging a dog.

The reluctance to tell, which arose from Elfride's simplicity in thinking herself so much more culpable than she really was, had been doing fatal work in Knight's mind. The man of many ideas, now that his first dream of impossible things was over, vibrated too far in the contrary direction; and her every movement of feature--every tremor--every confused word--was taken as so much proof of her unworthiness.

'Elfride, we must bid good-bye to compliment,' said Knight: 'we must

do without politeness now. Look in my face, and as you believe in God above, tell me truly one thing more. Were you away alone with him?

'Yes.'

'Did you return home the same day on which you left it?'

'No.'

The word fell like a bolt, and the very land and sky seemed to suffer. Knight turned aside. Meantime Elfride's countenance wore a look indicating utter despair of being able to explain matters so that they would seem no more than they really were,--a despair which not only relinquishes the hope of direct explanation, but wearily gives up all collateral chances of extenuation.

The scene was engraved for years on the retina of Knight's eye: the dead and brown stubble, the weeds among it, the distant belt of beeches shutting out the view of the house, the leaves of which were now red and sick to death.

'You must forget me,' he said. 'We shall not marry, Elfride.'

How much anguish passed into her soul at those words from him was told by the look of supreme torture she wore.

'What meaning have you, Harry? You only say so, do you?'

She looked doubtingly up at him, and tried to laugh, as if the unreality of his words must be unquestionable.

'You are not in earnest, I know--I hope you are not? Surely I belong to you, and you are going to keep me for yours?'

'Elfride, I have been speaking too roughly to you; I have said what I ought only to have thought. I like you; and let me give you a word of advice. Marry your man as soon as you can. However weary of each other you may feel, you belong to each other, and I am not going to step between you. Do you think I would--do you think I could for a moment? If you cannot marry him now, and another makes you his wife, do not reveal this secret to him after marriage, if you do not before. Honesty would be damnation then.'

Bewildered by his expressions, she exclaimed--

'No, no; I will not be a wife unless I am yours; and I must be yours!'

'If we had married----'

'But you don't MEAN--that--that--you will go away and leave me, and not be anything more to me--oh, you don't!'

Convulsive sobs took all nerve out of her utterance. She checked them, and continued to look in his face for the ray of hope that was not to be found there.

'I am going indoors,' said Knight. 'You will not follow me, Elfride; I wish you not to.'

'Oh no; indeed, I will not.'

'And then I am going to Castle Boterel. Good-bye.'

He spoke the farewell as if it were but for the day--lightly, as he had spoken such temporary farewells many times before--and she seemed to understand it as such. Knight had not the power to tell her plainly that he was going for ever; he hardly knew for certain that he was: whether he should rush back again upon the current of an irresistible emotion, or whether he could sufficiently conquer himself, and her in him, to establish that parting as a supreme farewell, and present himself to the world again as no woman's.

Ten minutes later he had left the house, leaving directions that if he did not return in the evening his luggage was to be sent to his chambers in London, whence he intended to write to Mr. Swancourt as to the reasons of his sudden departure. He descended the valley, and could not forbear turning his head. He saw the stubble-field, and a slight girlish figure in the midst of it--up against the sky. Elfride, docile as ever,

had hardly moved a step, for he had said, Remain. He looked and saw her again--he saw her for weeks and months. He withdrew his eyes from the scene, swept his hand across them, as if to brush away the sight, breathed a low groan, and went on.