

## Chapter XXXVI

'The pennie's the jewel that beautifies a'.'

'I can't think what's coming to these St. Launce's people at all at all.'

'With their "How-d'ye-do's," do you mean?'

'Ay, with their "How-d'ye-do's," and shaking of hands, asking me in, and tender inquiries for you, John.'

These words formed part of a conversation between John Smith and his wife on a Saturday evening in the spring which followed Knight's departure from England. Stephen had long since returned to India; and the persevering couple themselves had migrated from Lord Luxellian's park at Endelstow to a comfortable roadside dwelling about a mile out of St. Launce's, where John had opened a small stone and slate yard in his own name.

'When we came here six months ago,' continued Mrs. Smith, 'though I had paid ready money so many years in the town, my friskier shopkeepers would only speak over the counter. Meet 'em in the street half-an-hour after, and they'd treat me with staring ignorance of my face.'

'Look through ye as through a glass winder?'

'Yes, the brazen ones would. The quiet and cool ones would glance over the top of my head, past my side, over my shoulder, but never meet my eye. The gentle-modest would turn their faces south if I were coming east, flit down a passage if I were about to halve the pavement with them. There was the spruce young bookseller would play the same tricks; the butcher's daughters; the upholsterer's young men. Hand in glove when doing business out of sight with you; but caring nothing for a' old woman when playing the genteel away from all signs of their trade.'

'True enough, Maria.'

'Well, to-day 'tis all different. I'd no sooner got to market than Mrs. Joakes rushed up to me in the eyes of the town and said, "My dear Mrs. Smith, now you must be tired with your walk! Come in and have some lunch! I insist upon it; knowing you so many years as I have! Don't you remember when we used to go looking for owls' feathers together in the Castle ruins?" There's no knowing what you may need, so I answered the woman civilly. I hadn't got to the corner before that thriving young lawyer, Sweet, who's quite the dandy, ran after me out of breath. "Mrs. Smith," he says, "excuse my rudeness, but there's a bramble on the tail of your dress, which you've dragged in from the country; allow me to pull it off for you." If you'll believe me, this was in the very front of the Town Hall. What's the meaning of such sudden love for a' old woman?'

'Can't say; unless 'tis repentance.'

'Repentance! was there ever such a fool as you. John? Did anybody ever repent with money in's pocket and fifty years to live?'

'Now, I've been thinking too,' said John, passing over the query as hardly pertinent, 'that I've had more loving-kindness from folks to-day than I ever have before since we moved here. Why, old Alderman Tope walked out to the middle of the street where I was, to shake hands with me--so 'a did. Having on my working clothes, I thought 'twas odd. Ay, and there was young Werrington.'

'Who's he?'

'Why, the man in Hill Street, who plays and sells flutes, trumpets, and fiddles, and grand pehanners. He was talking to Egloskerry, that very small bachelor-man with money in the funds. I was going by, I'm sure, without thinking or expecting a nod from men of that glib kidney when in my working clothes----'

'You always will go poking into town in your working clothes. Beg you to change how I will, 'tis no use.'

'Well, however, I was in my working clothes. Werrington saw me. "Ah, Mr. Smith! a fine morning; excellent weather for building," says he, out as

loud and friendly as if I'd met him in some deep hollow, where he could get nobody else to speak to at all. 'Twas odd: for Werrington is one of the very ringleaders of the fast class.'

At that moment a tap came to the door. The door was immediately opened by Mrs. Smith in person.

'You'll excuse us, I'm sure, Mrs. Smith, but this beautiful spring weather was too much for us. Yes, and we could stay in no longer; and I took Mrs. Trewen upon my arm directly we'd had a cup of tea, and out we came. And seeing your beautiful crocuses in such a bloom, we've taken the liberty to enter. We'll step round the garden, if you don't mind.'

'Not at all,' said Mrs. Smith; and they walked round the garden. She lifted her hands in amazement directly their backs were turned. 'Goodness send us grace!'

'Who be they?' said her husband.

'Actually Mr. Trewen, the bank-manager, and his wife.'

John Smith, staggered in mind, went out of doors and looked over the garden gate, to collect his ideas. He had not been there two minutes when wheels were heard, and a carriage and pair rolled along the road. A distinguished-looking lady, with the demeanour of a duchess, reclined within. When opposite Smith's gate she turned her head, and instantly

commanded the coachman to stop.

'Ah, Mr. Smith, I am glad to see you looking so well. I could not help stopping a moment to congratulate you and Mrs. Smith upon the happiness you must enjoy. Joseph, you may drive on.'

And the carriage rolled away towards St. Launce's.

Out rushed Mrs. Smith from behind a laurel-bush, where she had stood pondering.

'Just going to touch my hat to her,' said John; 'just for all the world as I would have to poor Lady Luxellian years ago.'

'Lord! who is she?'

'The public-house woman--what's her name? Mrs.--Mrs.--at the Falcon.'

'Public-house woman. The clumsiness of the Smith family! You MIGHT say the landlady of the Falcon Hotel, since we are in for politeness. The people are ridiculous enough, but give them their due.'

The possibility is that Mrs. Smith was getting mollified, in spite of herself, by these remarkably friendly phenomena among the people of St. Launce's. And in justice to them it was quite desirable that she should do so. The interest which the unpractised ones of this town expressed so

grotesquely was genuine of its kind, and equal in intrinsic worth to the more polished smiles of larger communities.

By this time Mr. and Mrs. Trewen were returning from the garden.

'I'll ask 'em flat,' whispered John to his wife. 'I'll say, "We be in a fog--you'll excuse my asking a question, Mr. and Mrs. Trewen. How is it you all be so friendly to-day?" Hey? 'Twould sound right and sensible, wouldn't it?'

'Not a word! Good mercy, when will the man have manners!'

'It must be a proud moment for you, I am sure, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, to have a son so celebrated,' said the bank-manager advancing.

'Ah, 'tis Stephen--I knew it!' said Mrs. Smith triumphantly to herself.

'We don't know particulars,' said John.

'Not know!'

'No.'

'Why, 'tis all over town. Our worthy Mayor alluded to it in a speech at the dinner last night of the Every-Man-his-own-Maker Club.'

'And what about Stephen?' urged Mrs. Smith.

'Why, your son has been feted by deputy-governors and Parsee princes and nobody-knows-who in India; is hand in glove with nabobs, and is to design a large palace, and cathedral, and hospitals, colleges, halls, and fortifications, by the general consent of the ruling powers, Christian and Pagan alike.'

"'Twas sure to come to the boy,' said Mr. Smith unassumingly.

"'Tis in yesterday's St. Launce's Chronicle; and our worthy Mayor in the chair introduced the subject into his speech last night in a masterly manner.'

"'Twas very good of the worthy Mayor in the chair I'm sure,' said Stephen's mother. 'I hope the boy will have the sense to keep what he's got; but as for men, they are a simple sex. Some woman will hook him.'

'Well, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, the evening closes in, and we must be going; and remember this, that every Saturday when you come in to market, you are to make our house as your own. There will be always a tea-cup and saucer for you, as you know there has been for months, though you may have forgotten it. I'm a plain-speaking woman, and what I say I mean.'

When the visitors were gone, and the sun had set, and the moon's rays were just beginning to assert themselves upon the walls of the dwelling,

John Smith and his wife sat dawn to the newspaper they had hastily procured from the town. And when the reading was done, they considered how best to meet the new social requirements settling upon them, which Mrs. Smith considered could be done by new furniture and house enlargement alone.

'And, John, mind one thing,' she said in conclusion. 'In writing to Stephen, never by any means mention the name of Elfride Swancourt again. We've left the place, and know no more about her except by hearsay. He seems to be getting free of her, and glad am I for it. It was a cloudy hour for him when he first set eyes upon the girl. That family's been no good to him, first or last; so let them keep their blood to themselves if they want to. He thinks of her, I know, but not so hopelessly. So don't try to know anything about her, and we can't answer his questions. She may die out of his mind then.'

'That shall be it,' said John.