Chapter XXXVII

'After many days.'

Knight roamed south, under colour of studying Continental antiquities.

He paced the lofty aisles of Amiens, loitered by Ardennes Abbey, climbed into the strange towers of Laon, analyzed Noyon and Rheims. Then he went to Chartres, and examined its scaly spires and quaint carving then he idled about Coutances. He rowed beneath the base of Mont St. Michel, and caught the varied skyline of the crumbling edifices encrusting it.
St. Ouen's, Rouen, knew him for days; so did Vezelay, Sens, and many a hallowed monument besides. Abandoning the inspection of early French art with the same purposeless haste as he had shown in undertaking it, he went further, and lingered about Ferrara, Padua, and Pisa. Satiated with mediaevalism, he tried the Roman Forum. Next he observed moonlight and starlight effects by the bay of Naples. He turned to Austria, became enervated and depressed on Hungarian and Bohemian plains, and was refreshed again by breezes on the declivities of the Carpathians.

Then he found himself in Greece. He visited the plain of Marathon, and strove to imagine the Persian defeat; to Mars Hill, to picture St. Paul addressing the ancient Athenians; to Thermopylae and Salamis, to run through the facts and traditions of the Second Invasion--the result of his endeavours being more or less chaotic. Knight grew as weary of these

places as of all others. Then he felt the shock of an earthquake in the Ionian Islands, and went to Venice. Here he shot in gondolas up and down the winding thoroughfare of the Grand Canal, and loitered on calle and piazza at night, when the lagunes were undisturbed by a ripple, and no sound was to be heard but the stroke of the midnight clock. Afterwards he remained for weeks in the museums, galleries, and libraries of Vienna, Berlin, and Paris; and thence came home.

Time thus rolls us on to a February afternoon, divided by fifteen months from the parting of Elfride and her lover in the brown stubble field towards the sea.

Two men obviously not Londoners, and with a touch of foreignness in their look, met by accident on one of the gravel walks leading across Hyde Park. The younger, more given to looking about him than his fellow, saw and noticed the approach of his senior some time before the latter had raised his eyes from the ground, upon which they were bent in an abstracted gaze that seemed habitual with him.

'Mr. Knight--indeed it is!' exclaimed the younger man.

'Ah, Stephen Smith!' said Knight.

Simultaneous operations might now have been observed progressing in both, the result being that an expression less frank and impulsive than the first took possession of their features. It was manifest that the

next words uttered were a superficial covering to constraint on both sides.

'Have you been in England long?' said Knight.

'Only two days,' said Smith.

'India ever since?'

'Nearly ever since.'

'They were making a fuss about you at St. Launce's last year. I fancy I saw something of the sort in the papers.'

'Yes; I believe something was said about me.'

'I must congratulate you on your achievements.'

'Thanks, but they are nothing very extraordinary. A natural professional progress where there was no opposition.'

There followed that want of words which will always assert itself between nominal friends who find they have ceased to be real ones, and have not yet sunk to the level of mere acquaintance. Each looked up and down the Park. Knight may possibly have borne in mind during the intervening months Stephen's manner towards him the last time they had

met, and may have encouraged his former interest in Stephen's welfare to die out of him as misplaced. Stephen certainly was full of the feelings begotten by the belief that Knight had taken away the woman he loved so well.

Stephen Smith then asked a question, adopting a certain recklessness of manner and tone to hide, if possible, the fact that the subject was a much greater one to him than his friend had ever supposed.

'Are you married?'

'I am not.'

Knight spoke in an indescribable tone of bitterness that was almost moroseness.

'And I never shall be,' he added decisively. 'Are you?'

'No,' said Stephen, sadly and quietly, like a man in a sick-room.
Totally ignorant whether or not Knight knew of his own previous claims upon Elfride, he yet resolved to hazard a few more words upon the topic which had an aching fascination for him even now.

'Then your engagement to Miss Swancourt came to nothing,' he said. 'You remember I met you with her once?'

Stephen's voice gave way a little here, in defiance of his firmest will to the contrary. Indian affairs had not yet lowered those emotions down to the point of control.

'It was broken off,' came quickly from Knight. 'Engagements to marry often end like that--for better or for worse.'

'Yes; so they do. And what have you been doing lately?'

'Doing? Nothing.'

'Where have you been?'

'I can hardly tell you. In the main, going about Europe; and it may perhaps interest you to know that I have been attempting the serious study of Continental art of the Middle Ages. My notes on each example I visited are at your service. They are of no use to me.'

'I shall be glad with them....Oh, travelling far and near!'

'Not far,' said Knight, with moody carelessness. 'You know, I daresay, that sheep occasionally become giddy--hydatids in the head, 'tis called, in which their brains become eaten up, and the animal exhibits the strange peculiarity of walking round and round in a circle continually. I have travelled just in the same way--round and round like a giddy ram.'

The reckless, bitter, and rambling style in which Knight talked, as if rather to vent his images than to convey any ideas to Stephen, struck the young man painfully. His former friend's days had become cankered in some way: Knight was a changed man. He himself had changed much, but not as Knight had changed.

'Yesterday I came home,' continued Knight, 'without having, to the best of my belief, imbibed half-a-dozen ideas worth retaining.'

'You out-Hamlet Hamlet in morbidness of mood,' said Stephen, with regretful frankness.

Knight made no reply.

'Do you know,' Stephen continued, 'I could almost have sworn that you would be married before this time, from what I saw?'

Knight's face grew harder. 'Could you?' he said.

Stephen was powerless to forsake the depressing, luring subject.

'Yes; and I simply wonder at it.'

'Whom did you expect me to marry?'

'Her I saw you with.'

'Thank you for that wonder.'

'Did she jilt you?'

'Smith, now one word to you,' Knight returned steadily. 'Don't you ever question me on that subject. I have a reason for making this request, mind. And if you do question me, you will not get an answer.'

'Oh, I don't for a moment wish to ask what is unpleasant to you--not I. I had a momentary feeling that I should like to explain something on my side, and hear a similar explanation on yours. But let it go, let it go, by all means.'

'What would you explain?'

'I lost the woman I was going to marry: you have not married as you intended. We might have compared notes.'

'I have never asked you a word about your case.'

'I know that.'

'And the inference is obvious.'

'Quite so.'

'The truth is, Stephen, I have doggedly resolved never to allude to the matter--for which I have a very good reason.'

'Doubtless. As good a reason as you had for not marrying her.'

'You talk insidiously. I had a good one--a miserably good one!'

Smith's anxiety urged him to venture one more question.

'Did she not love you enough?' He drew his breath in a slow and attenuated stream, as he waited in timorous hope for the answer.

'Stephen, you rather strain ordinary courtesy in pressing questions of that kind after what I have said. I cannot understand you at all. I must go on now.'

'Why, good God!' exclaimed Stephen passionately, 'you talk as if you hadn't at all taken her away from anybody who had better claims to her than you!'

'What do you mean by that?' said Knight, with a puzzled air. 'What have you heard?'

'Nothing. I too must go on. Good-day.'

'If you will go,' said Knight, reluctantly now, 'you must, I suppose. I am sure I cannot understand why you behave so.'

'Nor I why you do. I have always been grateful to you, and as far as I am concerned we need never have become so estranged as we have.'

'And have I ever been anything but well-disposed towards you, Stephen? Surely you know that I have not! The system of reserve began with you: you know that.'

'No, no! You altogether mistake our position. You were always from the first reserved to me, though I was confidential to you. That was, I suppose, the natural issue of our differing positions in life. And when I, the pupil, became reserved like you, the master, you did not like it. However, I was going to ask you to come round and see me.'

'Where are you staying?'

'At the Grosvenor Hotel, Pimlico.'

'So am I.'

'That's convenient, not to say odd. Well, I am detained in London for a day or two; then I am going down to see my father and mother, who live

at St. Launce's now. Will you see me this evening?'

'I may; but I will not promise. I was wishing to be alone for an hour or two; but I shall know where to find you, at any rate. Good-bye.'