

Chapter XXXVIII

'Jealousy is cruel as the grave.'

Stephen pondered not a little on this meeting with his old friend and once-beloved exemplar. He was grieved, for amid all the distractions of his latter years a still small voice of fidelity to Knight had lingered on in him. Perhaps this staunchness was because Knight ever treated him as a mere disciple--even to snubbing him sometimes; and had at last, though unwittingly, inflicted upon him the greatest snub of all, that of taking away his sweetheart. The emotional side of his constitution was built rather after a feminine than a male model; and that tremendous wound from Knight's hand may have tended to keep alive a warmth which solicitousness would have extinguished altogether.

Knight, on his part, was vexed, after they had parted, that he had not taken Stephen in hand a little after the old manner. Those words which Smith had let fall concerning somebody having a prior claim to Elfride, would, if uttered when the man was younger, have provoked such a query as, 'Come, tell me all about it, my lad,' from Knight, and Stephen would straightway have delivered himself of all he knew on the subject.

Stephen the ingenuous boy, though now obliterated externally by Stephen the contriving man, returned to Knight's memory vividly that afternoon. He was at present but a sojourner in London; and after attending to the

two or three matters of business which remained to be done that day, he walked abstractedly into the gloomy corridors of the British Museum for the half-hour previous to their closing. That meeting with Smith had reunited the present with the past, closing up the chasm of his absence from England as if it had never existed, until the final circumstances of his previous time of residence in London formed but a yesterday to the circumstances now. The conflict that then had raged in him concerning Elfride Swancourt revived, strengthened by its sleep. Indeed, in those many months of absence, though quelling the intention to make her his wife, he had never forgotten that she was the type of woman adapted to his nature; and instead of trying to obliterate thoughts of her altogether, he had grown to regard them as an infirmity it was necessary to tolerate.

Knight returned to his hotel much earlier in the evening than he would have done in the ordinary course of things. He did not care to think whether this arose from a friendly wish to close the gap that had slowly been widening between himself and his earliest acquaintance, or from a hankering desire to hear the meaning of the dark oracles Stephen had hastily pronounced, betokening that he knew something more of Elfride than Knight had supposed.

He made a hasty dinner, inquired for Smith, and soon was ushered into the young man's presence, whom he found sitting in front of a comfortable fire, beside a table spread with a few scientific periodicals and art reviews.

'I have come to you, after all,' said Knight. 'My manner was odd this morning, and it seemed desirable to call; but that you had too much sense to notice, Stephen, I know. Put it down to my wanderings in France and Italy.'

'Don't say another word, but sit down. I am only too glad to see you again.'

Stephen would hardly have cared to tell Knight just then that the minute before Knight was announced he had been reading over some old letters of Elfride's. They were not many; and until to-night had been sealed up, and stowed away in a corner of his leather trunk, with a few other mementoes and relics which had accompanied him in his travels. The familiar sights and sounds of London, the meeting with his friend, had with him also revived that sense of abiding continuity with regard to Elfride and love which his absence at the other side of the world had to some extent suspended, though never ruptured. He at first intended only to look over these letters on the outside; then he read one; then another; until the whole was thus re-used as a stimulus to sad memories. He folded them away again, placed them in his pocket, and instead of going on with an examination into the state of the artistic world, had remained musing on the strange circumstance that he had returned to find Knight not the husband of Elfride after all.

The possibility of any given gratification begets a cumulative sense of

its necessity. Stephen gave the rein to his imagination, and felt more intensely than he had felt for many months that, without Elfride, his life would never be any great pleasure to himself, or honour to his Maker.

They sat by the fire, chatting on external and random subjects, neither caring to be the first to approach the matter each most longed to discuss. On the table with the periodicals lay two or three pocket-books, one of them being open. Knight seeing from the exposed page that the contents were sketches only, began turning the leaves over carelessly with his finger. When, some time later, Stephen was out of the room, Knight proceeded to pass the interval by looking at the sketches more carefully.

The first crude ideas, pertaining to dwellings of all kinds, were roughly outlined on the different pages. Antiquities had been copied; fragments of Indian columns, colossal statues, and outlandish ornament from the temples of Elephanta and Kenneri, were carelessly intruded upon by outlines of modern doors, windows, roofs, cooking-stoves, and household furniture; everything, in short, which comes within the range of a practising architect's experience, who travels with his eyes open. Among these occasionally appeared rough delineations of mediaeval subjects for carving or illumination--heads of Virgins, Saints, and Prophets.

Stephen was not professedly a free-hand draughtsman, but he drew the

human figure with correctness and skill. In its numerous repetitions on the sides and edges of the leaves, Knight began to notice a peculiarity. All the feminine saints had one type of feature. There were large nimbi and small nimbi about their drooping heads, but the face was always the same. That profile--how well Knight knew that profile!

Had there been but one specimen of the familiar countenance, he might have passed over the resemblance as accidental; but a repetition meant more. Knight thought anew of Smith's hasty words earlier in the day, and looked at the sketches again and again.

On the young man's entry, Knight said with palpable agitation--

'Stephen, who are those intended for?'

Stephen looked over the book with utter unconcern, 'Saints and angels, done in my leisure moments. They were intended as designs for the stained glass of an English church.'

'But whom do you idealize by that type of woman you always adopt for the Virgin?'

'Nobody.'

And then a thought raced along Stephen's mind and he looked up at his friend.

The truth is, Stephen's introduction of Elfride's lineaments had been so unconscious that he had not at first understood his companion's drift. The hand, like the tongue, easily acquires the trick of repetition by rote, without calling in the mind to assist at all; and this had been the case here. Young men who cannot write verses about their Loves generally take to portraying them, and in the early days of his attachment Smith had never been weary of outlining Elfride. The lay-figure of Stephen's sketches now initiated an adjustment of many things. Knight had recognized her. The opportunity of comparing notes had come unsought.

'Elfride Swancourt, to whom I was engaged,' he said quietly.

'Stephen!'

'I know what you mean by speaking like that.'

'Was it Elfride? YOU the man, Stephen?'

'Yes; and you are thinking why did I conceal the fact from you that time at Endelstow, are you not?'

'Yes, and more--more.'

'I did it for the best; blame me if you will; I did it for the best. And

now say how could I be with you afterwards as I had been before?'

'I don't know at all; I can't say.'

Knight remained fixed in thought, and once he murmured--

'I had a suspicion this afternoon that there might be some such meaning in your words about my taking her away. But I dismissed it. How came you to know her?' he presently asked, in almost a peremptory tone.

'I went down about the church; years ago now.'

'When you were with Hewby, of course, of course. Well, I can't understand it.' His tones rose. 'I don't know what to say, your hoodwinking me like this for so long!'

'I don't see that I have hoodwinked you at all.'

'Yes, yes, but'----

Knight arose from his seat, and began pacing up and down the room. His face was markedly pale, and his voice perturbed, as he said--

'You did not act as I should have acted towards you under those circumstances. I feel it deeply; and I tell you plainly, I shall never forget it!'

'What?'

'Your behaviour at that meeting in the family vault, when I told you we were going to be married. Deception, dishonesty, everywhere; all the world's of a piece!'

Stephen did not much like this misconstruction of his motives, even though it was but the hasty conclusion of a friend disturbed by emotion.

'I could do no otherwise than I did, with due regard to her,' he said stiffly.

'Indeed!' said Knight, in the bitterest tone of reproach. 'Nor could you with due regard to her have married her, I suppose! I have hoped--longed--that HE, who turns out to be YOU, would ultimately have done that.'

'I am much obliged to you for that hope. But you talk very mysteriously. I think I had about the best reason anybody could have had for not doing that.'

'Oh, what reason was it?'

'That I could not.'

'You ought to have made an opportunity; you ought to do so now, in bare justice to her, Stephen!' cried Knight, carried beyond himself. 'That you know very well, and it hurts and wounds me more than you dream to find you never have tried to make any reparation to a woman of that kind--so trusting, so apt to be run away with by her feelings--poor little fool, so much the worse for her!'

'Why, you talk like a madman! You took her away from me, did you not?'

'Picking up what another throws down can scarcely be called "taking away." However, we shall not agree too well upon that subject, so we had better part.'

'But I am quite certain you misapprehend something most grievously,' said Stephen, shaken to the bottom of his heart. 'What have I done; tell me? I have lost Elfride, but is that such a sin?'

'Was it her doing, or yours?'

'Was what?'

'That you parted.'

'I will tell you honestly. It was hers entirely, entirely.'

'What was her reason?'

'I can hardly say. But I'll tell the story without reserve.'

Stephen until to-day had unhesitatingly held that she grew tired of him and turned to Knight; but he did not like to advance the statement now, or even to think the thought. To fancy otherwise accorded better with the hope to which Knight's estrangement had given birth: that love for his friend was not the direct cause, but a result of her suspension of love for himself.

'Such a matter must not be allowed to breed discord between us,' Knight returned, relapsing into a manner which concealed all his true feeling, as if confidence now was intolerable. 'I do see that your reticence towards me in the vault may have been dictated by prudential considerations.' He concluded artificially, 'It was a strange thing altogether; but not of much importance, I suppose, at this distance of time; and it does not concern me now, though I don't mind hearing your story.'

These words from Knight, uttered with such an air of renunciation and apparent indifference, prompted Smith to speak on--perhaps with a little complacency--of his old secret engagement to Elfride. He told the details of its origin, and the peremptory words and actions of her father to extinguish their love.

Knight persevered in the tone and manner of a disinterested outsider.

It had become more than ever imperative to screen his emotions from Stephen's eye; the young man would otherwise be less frank, and their meeting would be again embittered. What was the use of untoward candour?

Stephen had now arrived at the point in his ingenuous narrative where he left the vicarage because of her father's manner. Knight's interest increased. Their love seemed so innocent and childlike thus far.

'It is a nice point in casuistry,' he observed, 'to decide whether you were culpable or not in not telling Swancourt that your friends were parishioners of his. It was only human nature to hold your tongue under the circumstances. Well, what was the result of your dismissal by him?'

'That we agreed to be secretly faithful. And to insure this we thought we would marry.'

Knight's suspense and agitation rose higher when Stephen entered upon this phase of the subject.

'Do you mind telling on?' he said, steadying his manner of speech.

'Oh, not at all.'

Then Stephen gave in full the particulars of the meeting with Elfride at the railway station; the necessity they were under of going to London, unless the ceremony were to be postponed. The long journey of the

afternoon and evening; her timidity and revulsion of feeling; its culmination on reaching London; the crossing over to the down-platform and their immediate departure again, solely in obedience to her wish; the journey all night; their anxious watching for the dawn; their arrival at St. Launce's at last--were detailed. And he told how a village woman named Jethway was the only person who recognized them, either going or coming; and how dreadfully this terrified Elfride. He told how he waited in the fields whilst this then reproachful sweetheart went for her pony, and how the last kiss he ever gave her was given a mile out of the town, on the way to Endelstow.

These things Stephen related with a will. He believed that in doing so he established word by word the reasonableness of his claim to Elfride.

'Curse her! curse that woman!--that miserable letter that parted us! O God!'

Knight began pacing the room again, and uttered this at further end.

'What did you say?' said Stephen, turning round.

'Say? Did I say anything? Oh, I was merely thinking about your story, and the oddness of my having a fancy for the same woman afterwards. And that now I--I have forgotten her almost; and neither of us care about her, except just as a friend, you know, eh?'

Knicht still continued at the further end of the room, somewhat in shadow.

'Exactly,' said Stephen, inwardly exultant, for he was really deceived by Knicht's off-hand manner.

Yet he was deceived less by the completeness of Knicht's disguise than by the persuasive power which lay in the fact that Knicht had never before deceived him in anything. So this supposition that his companion had ceased to love Elfride was an enormous lightening of the weight which had turned the scale against him.

'Admitting that Elfride COULD love another man after you,' said the elder, under the same varnish of careless criticism, 'she was none the worse for that experience.'

'The worse? Of course she was none the worse.'

'Did you ever think it a wild and thoughtless thing for her to do?'

'Indeed, I never did,' said Stephen. 'I persuaded her. She saw no harm in it until she decided to return, nor did I; nor was there, except to the extent of indiscretion.'

'Directly she thought it was wrong she would go no further?'

'That was it. I had just begun to think it wrong too.'

'Such a childish escapade might have been misrepresented by any evil-disposed person, might it not?'

'It might; but I never heard that it was. Nobody who really knew all the circumstances would have done otherwise than smile. If all the world had known it, Elfride would still have remained the only one who thought her action a sin. Poor child, she always persisted in thinking so, and was frightened more than enough.'

'Stephen, do you love her now?'

'Well, I like her; I always shall, you know,' he said evasively, and with all the strategy love suggested. 'But I have not seen her for so long that I can hardly be expected to love her. Do you love her still?'

'How shall I answer without being ashamed? What fickle beings we men are, Stephen! Men may love strongest for a while, but women love longest. I used to love her--in my way, you know.'

'Yes, I understand. Ah, and I used to love her in my way. In fact, I loved her a good deal at one time; but travel has a tendency to obliterate early fancies.'

'It has--it has, truly.'

Perhaps the most extraordinary feature in this conversation was the circumstance that, though each interlocutor had at first his suspicions of the other's abiding passion awakened by several little acts, neither would allow himself to see that his friend might now be speaking deceitfully as well as he.

'Stephen.' resumed Knight, 'now that matters are smooth between us, I think I must leave you. You won't mind my hurrying off to my quarters?'

'You'll stay to some sort of supper surely? didn't you come to dinner!'

'You must really excuse me this once.'

'Then you'll drop in to breakfast to-morrow.'

'I shall be rather pressed for time.'

'An early breakfast, which shall interfere with nothing?'

'I'll come,' said Knight, with as much readiness as it was possible to graft upon a huge stock of reluctance. 'Yes, early; eight o'clock say, as we are under the same roof.'

'Any time you like. Eight it shall be.'

And Knight left him. To wear a mask, to dissemble his feelings as he had in their late miserable conversation, was such torture that he could support it no longer. It was the first time in Knight's life that he had ever been so entirely the player of a part. And the man he had thus deceived was Stephen, who had docilely looked up to him from youth as a superior of unblemished integrity.

He went to bed, and allowed the fever of his excitement to rage uncontrolled. Stephen--it was only he who was the rival--only Stephen! There was an anti-climax of absurdity which Knight, wretched and conscience-stricken as he was, could not help recognizing. Stephen was but a boy to him. Where the great grief lay was in perceiving that the very innocence of Elfride in reading her little fault as one so grave was what had fatally misled him. Had Elfride, with any degree of coolness, asserted that she had done no harm, the poisonous breath of the dead Mrs. Jethway would have been inoperative. Why did he not make his little docile girl tell more? If on that subject he had only exercised the imperativeness customary with him on others, all might have been revealed. It smote his heart like a switch when he remembered how gently she had borne his scourging speeches, never answering him with a single reproach, only assuring him of her unbounded love.

Knight blessed Elfride for her sweetness, and forgot her fault. He pictured with a vivid fancy those fair summer scenes with her. He again saw her as at their first meeting, timid at speaking, yet in her eagerness to be explanatory borne forward almost against her will.

How she would wait for him in green places, without showing any of the ordinary womanly affectations of indifference! How proud she was to be seen walking with him, bearing legibly in her eyes the thought that he was the greatest genius in the world!

He formed a resolution; and after that could make pretence of slumber no longer. Rising and dressing himself, he sat down and waited for day.

That night Stephen was restless too. Not because of the unwontedness of a return to English scenery; not because he was about to meet his parents, and settle down for awhile to English cottage life. He was indulging in dreams, and for the nonce the warehouses of Bombay and the plains and forts of Poonah were but a shadow's shadow. His dream was based on this one atom of fact: Elfride and Knight had become separated, and their engagement was as if it had never been. Their rupture must have occurred soon after Stephen's discovery of the fact of their union; and, Stephen went on to think, what so probable as that a return of her errant affection to himself was the cause?

Stephen's opinions in this matter were those of a lover, and not the balanced judgment of an unbiassed spectator. His naturally sanguine spirit built hope upon hope, till scarcely a doubt remained in his mind that her lingering tenderness for him had in some way been perceived by Knight, and had provoked their parting.

To go and see Elfride was the suggestion of impulses it was impossible

to withstand. At any rate, to run down from St. Launce's to Castle Poterel, a distance of less than twenty miles, and glide like a ghost about their old haunts, making stealthy inquiries about her, would be a fascinating way of passing the first spare hours after reaching home on the day after the morrow.

He was now a richer man than heretofore, standing on his own bottom; and the definite position in which he had rooted himself nullified old local distinctions. He had become illustrious, even sanguine clarus, judging from the tone of the worthy Mayor of St. Launce's.