Chapter XXXIX

'Each to the loved one's side.'

The friends and rivals breakfasted together the next morning. Not a word was said on either side upon the matter discussed the previous evening so glibly and so hollowly. Stephen was absorbed the greater part of the time in wishing he were not forced to stay in town yet another day.

'I don't intend to leave for St. Launce's till to-morrow, as you know,' he said to Knight at the end of the meal. 'What are you going to do with yourself to-day?'

'I have an engagement just before ten,' said Knight deliberately; 'and after that time I must call upon two or three people.'

'I'll look for you this evening,' said Stephen.

'Yes, do. You may as well come and dine with me; that is, if we can meet. I may not sleep in London to-night; in fact, I am absolutely unsettled as to my movements yet. However, the first thing I am going to do is to get my baggage shifted from this place to Bede's Inn. Good-bye for the present. I'll write, you know, if I can't meet you.'

It now wanted a quarter to nine o'clock. When Knight was gone, Stephen

felt yet more impatient of the circumstance that another day would have to drag itself away wearily before he could set out for that spot of earth whereon a soft thought of him might perhaps be nourished still. On a sudden he admitted to his mind the possibility that the engagement he was waiting in town to keep might be postponed without much harm.

It was no sooner perceived than attempted. Looking at his watch, he found it wanted forty minutes to the departure of the ten o'clock train from Paddington, which left him a surplus quarter of an hour before it would be necessary to start for the station.

Scribbling a hasty note or two--one putting off the business meeting, another to Knight apologizing for not being able to see him in the evening--paying his bill, and leaving his heavier luggage to follow him by goods-train, he jumped into a cab and rattled off to the Great Western Station.

Shortly afterwards he took his seat in the railway carriage.

The guard paused on his whistle, to let into the next compartment to Smith's a man of whom Stephen had caught but a hasty glimpse as he ran across the platform at the last moment.

Smith sank back into the carriage, stilled by perplexity. The man was like Knight--astonishingly like him. Was it possible it could be he? To have got there he must have driven like the wind to Bede's Inn, and

hardly have alighted before starting again. No, it could not be he; that was not his way of doing things.

During the early part of the journey Stephen Smith's thoughts busied themselves till his brain seemed swollen. One subject was concerning his own approaching actions. He was a day earlier than his letter to his parents had stated, and his arrangement with them had been that they should meet him at Plymouth; a plan which pleased the worthy couple beyond expression. Once before the same engagement had been made, which he had then quashed by ante-dating his arrival. This time he would go right on to Castle Boterel; ramble in that well-known neighbourhood during the evening and next morning, making inquiries; and return to Plymouth to meet them as arranged--a contrivance which would leave their cherished project undisturbed, relieving his own impatience also.

At Chippenham there was a little waiting, and some loosening and attaching of carriages.

Stephen looked out. At the same moment another man's head emerged from the adjoining window. Each looked in the other's face.

Knight and Stephen confronted one another.

'You here!' said the younger man.

'Yes. It seems that you are too,' said Knight, strangely.

'Yes.'

The selfishness of love and the cruelty of jealousy were fairly exemplified at this moment. Each of the two men looked at his friend as he had never looked at him before. Each was TROUBLED at the other's presence.

'I thought you said you were not coming till to-morrow,' remarked Knight.

'I did. It was an afterthought to come to-day. This journey was your engagement, then?'

'No, it was not. This is an afterthought of mine too. I left a note to explain it, and account for my not being able to meet you this evening as we arranged.'

'So did I for you.'

'You don't look well: you did not this morning.'

'I have a headache. You are paler to-day than you were.'

'I, too, have been suffering from headache. We have to wait here a few

minutes, I think.'

They walked up and down the platform, each one more and more embarrassingly concerned with the awkwardness of his friend's presence. They reached the end of the footway, and paused in sheer absent-mindedness. Stephen's vacant eyes rested upon the operations of some porters, who were shifting a dark and curious-looking van from the rear of the train, to shunt another which was between it and the fore part of the train. This operation having been concluded, the two friends returned to the side of their carriage.

'Will you come in here?' said Knight, not very warmly.

'I have my rug and portmanteau and umbrella with me: it is rather bothering to move now,' said Stephen reluctantly. 'Why not you come here?'

'I have my traps too. It is hardly worth while to shift them, for I shall see you again, you know.'

'Oh, yes.'

And each got into his own place. Just at starting, a man on the platform held up his hands and stopped the train.

Stephen looked out to see what was the matter.

One of the officials was exclaiming to another, 'That carriage should have been attached again. Can't you see it is for the main line? Quick! What fools there are in the world!'

'What a confounded nuisance these stoppages are!' exclaimed Knight impatiently, looking out from his compartment. 'What is it?'

'That singular carriage we saw has been unfastened from our train by mistake, it seems,' said Stephen.

He was watching the process of attaching it. The van or carriage, which he now recognized as having seen at Paddington before they started, was rich and solemn rather than gloomy in aspect. It seemed to be quite new, and of modern design, and its impressive personality attracted the notice of others beside himself. He beheld it gradually wheeled forward by two men on each side: slower and more sadly it seemed to approach: then a slight concussion, and they were connected with it, and off again.

Stephen sat all the afternoon pondering upon the reason of Knight's unexpected reappearance. Was he going as far as Castle Boterel? If so, he could only have one object in view--a visit to Elfride. And what an idea it seemed!

At Plymouth Smith partook of a little refreshment, and then went round

to the side from which the train started for Camelton, the new station near Castle Boterel and Endelstow.

Knight was already there.

Stephen walked up and stood beside him without speaking. Two men at this moment crept out from among the wheels of the waiting train.

'The carriage is light enough,' said one in a grim tone. 'Light as vanity; full of nothing.'

'Nothing in size, but a good deal in signification,' said the other, a man of brighter mind and manners.

Smith then perceived that to their train was attached that same carriage of grand and dark aspect which had haunted them all the way from London.

'You are going on, I suppose?' said Knight, turning to Stephen, after idly looking at the same object.

'Yes.'

'We may as well travel together for the remaining distance, may we not?'

'Certainly we will;' and they both entered the same door.

Evening drew on apace. It chanced to be the eve of St. Valentine's--that bishop of blessed memory to youthful lovers--and the sun shone low under the rim of a thick hard cloud, decorating the eminences of the landscape with crowns of orange fire. As the train changed its direction on a curve, the same rays stretched in through the window, and coaxed open Knight's half-closed eyes.

'You will get out at St. Launce's, I suppose?' he murmured.

'No,' said Stephen, 'I am not expected till to-morrow.' Knight was silent.

'And you--are you going to Endelstow?' said the younger man pointedly.

'Since you ask, I can do no less than say I am, Stephen,' continued Knight slowly, and with more resolution of manner than he had shown all the day. 'I am going to Endelstow to see if Elfride Swancourt is still free; and if so, to ask her to be my wife.'

'So am I,' said Stephen Smith.

'I think you'll lose your labour,' Knight returned with decision.

'Naturally you do.' There was a strong accent of bitterness in Stephen's voice. 'You might have said HOPE instead of THINK,' he added.

'I might have done no such thing. I gave you my opinion. Elfride Swancourt may have loved you once, no doubt, but it was when she was so young that she hardly knew her own mind.'

'Thank you,' said Stephen laconically. 'She knew her mind as well as I did. We are the same age. If you hadn't interfered----'

'Don't say that--don't say it, Stephen! How can you make out that I interfered? Be just, please!'

'Well,' said his friend, 'she was mine before she was yours--you know that! And it seemed a hard thing to find you had got her, and that if it had not been for you, all might have turned out well for me.' Stephen spoke with a swelling heart, and looked out of the window to hide the emotion that would make itself visible upon his face.

'It is absurd,' said Knight in a kinder tone, 'for you to look at the matter in that light. What I tell you is for your good. You naturally do not like to realize the truth--that her liking for you was only a girl's first fancy, which has no root ever.'

'It is not true!' said Stephen passionately. 'It was you put me out. And now you'll be pushing in again between us, and depriving me of my chance again! My right, that's what it is! How ungenerous of you to come anew and try to take her away from me! When you had won her, I did not interfere; and you might, I think, Mr. Knight, do by me as I did by

you!'

'Don't "Mr." me; you are as well in the world as I am now.'

'First love is deepest; and that was mine.'

'Who told you that?' said Knight superciliously.

'I had her first love. And it was through me that you and she parted. I can guess that well enough.'

'It was. And if I were to explain to you in what way that operated in parting us, I should convince you that you do quite wrong in intruding upon her--that, as I said at first, your labour will be lost. I don't choose to explain, because the particulars are painful. But if you won't listen to me, go on, for Heaven's sake. I don't care what you do, my boy.'

'You have no right to domineer over me as you do. Just because, when I was a lad, I was accustomed to look up to you as a master, and you helped me a little, for which I was grateful to you and have loved you, you assume too much now, and step in before me. It is cruel--it is unjust--of you to injure me so!'

Knight showed himself keenly hurt at this. 'Stephen, those words are untrue and unworthy of any man, and they are unworthy of you. You know

you wrong me. If you have ever profited by any instruction of mine, I am only too glad to know it. You know it was given ungrudgingly, and that I have never once looked upon it as making you in any way a debtor to me.'

Stephen's naturally gentle nature was touched, and it was in a troubled voice that he said, 'Yes, yes. I am unjust in that--I own it.'

'This is St. Launce's Station, I think. Are you going to get out?'

Knight's manner of returning to the matter in hand drew Stephen again into himself. 'No; I told you I was going to Endelstow,' he resolutely replied.

Knight's features became impassive, and he said no more. The train continued rattling on, and Stephen leant back in his corner and closed his eyes. The yellows of evening had turned to browns, the dusky shades thickened, and a flying cloud of dust occasionally stroked the window--borne upon a chilling breeze which blew from the north-east. The previously gilded but now dreary hills began to lose their daylight aspects of rotundity, and to become black discs vandyked against the sky, all nature wearing the cloak that six o'clock casts over the landscape at this time of the year.

Stephen started up in bewilderment after a long stillness, and it was some time before he recollected himself.

'Well, how real, how real!' he exclaimed, brushing his hand across his eyes.

'What is?' said Knight.

'That dream. I fell asleep for a few minutes, and have had a dream--the most vivid I ever remember.'

He wearily looked out into the gloom. They were now drawing near to Camelton. The lighting of the lamps was perceptible through the veil of evening--each flame starting into existence at intervals, and blinking weakly against the gusts of wind.

'What did you dream?' said Knight moodily.

'Oh, nothing to be told. 'Twas a sort of incubus. There is never anything in dreams.'

'I hardly supposed there was.'

'I know that. However, what I so vividly dreamt was this, since you would like to hear. It was the brightest of bright mornings at East Endelstow Church, and you and I stood by the font. Far away in the chancel Lord Luxellian was standing alone, cold and impassive, and utterly unlike his usual self: but I knew it was he. Inside the altar rail stood a strange clergyman with his book open. He looked up and said

to Lord Luxellian, "Where's the bride?" Lord Luxellian said, "There's no bride." At that moment somebody came in at the door, and I knew her to be Lady Luxellian who died. He turned and said to her, "I thought you were in the vault below us; but that could have only been a dream of mine. Come on." Then she came on. And in brushing between us she chilled me so with cold that I exclaimed, "The life is gone out of me!" and, in the way of dreams, I awoke. But here we are at Camelton.'

They were slowly entering the station.

'What are you going to do?' said Knight. 'Do you really intend to call on the Swancourts?'

'By no means. I am going to make inquiries first. I shall stay at the Luxellian Arms to-night. You will go right on to Endelstow, I suppose, at once?'

'I can hardly do that at this time of the day. Perhaps you are not aware that the family--her father, at any rate--is at variance with me as much as with you.

'I didn't know it.'

'And that I cannot rush into the house as an old friend any more than you can. Certainly I have the privileges of a distant relationship, whatever they may be.'

Knight let down the window, and looked ahead. 'There are a great many people at the station,' he said. 'They seem all to be on the look-out for us.'

When the train stopped, the half-estranged friends could perceive by the lamplight that the assemblage of idlers enclosed as a kernel a group of men in black cloaks. A side gate in the platform railing was open, and outside this stood a dark vehicle, which they could not at first characterize. Then Knight saw on its upper part forms against the sky like cedars by night, and knew the vehicle to be a hearse. Few people were at the carriage doors to meet the passengers--the majority had congregated at this upper end. Knight and Stephen alighted, and turned for a moment in the same direction.

The sombre van, which had accompanied them all day from London, now began to reveal that their destination was also its own. It had been drawn up exactly opposite the open gate. The bystanders all fell back, forming a clear lane from the gateway to the van, and the men in cloaks entered the latter conveyance.

'They are labourers, I fancy,' said Stephen. 'Ah, it is strange; but I recognize three of them as Endelstow men. Rather remarkable this.'

Presently they began to come out, two and two; and under the rays of the lamp they were seen to bear between them a light-coloured coffin of

satin-wood, brightly polished, and without a nail. The eight men took the burden upon their shoulders, and slowly crossed with it over to the gate.

Knight and Stephen went outside, and came close to the procession as it moved off. A carriage belonging to the cortege turned round close to a lamp. The rays shone in upon the face of the vicar of Endelstow, Mr. Swancourt--looking many years older than when they had last seen him. Knight and Stephen involuntarily drew back.

Knight spoke to a bystander. 'What has Mr. Swancourt to do with that funeral?'

'He is the lady's father,' said the bystander.

'What lady's father?' said Knight, in a voice so hollow that the man stared at him.

'The father of the lady in the coffin. She died in London, you know, and has been brought here by this train. She is to be taken home to-night, and buried to-morrow.'

Knight stood staring blindly at where the hearse had been; as if he saw it, or some one, there. Then he turned, and beheld the lithe form of Stephen bowed down like that of an old man. He took his young friend's arm, and led him away from the light.