

Chapter XL

'Welcome, proud lady.'

Half an hour has passed. Two miserable men are wandering in the darkness up the miles of road from Camelton to Endelstow.

'Has she broken her heart?' said Henry Knight. 'Can it be that I have killed her? I was bitter with her, Stephen, and she has died! And may God have NO mercy upon me!'

'How can you have killed her more than I?'

'Why, I went away from her--stole away almost--and didn't tell her I should not come again; and at that last meeting I did not kiss her once, but let her miserably go. I have been a fool--a fool! I wish the most abject confession of it before crowds of my countrymen could in any way make amends to my darling for the intense cruelty I have shown her!'

'YOUR darling!' said Stephen, with a sort of laugh. 'Any man can say that, I suppose; any man can. I know this, she was MY darling before she was yours; and after too. If anybody has a right to call her his own, it is I.'

'You talk like a man in the dark; which is what you are. Did she ever do

anything for you? Risk her name, for instance, for you?'

Yes, she did,' said Stephen emphatically.

'Not entirely. Did she ever live for you--prove she could not live without you--laugh and weep for you?'

'Yes.'

'Never! Did she ever risk her life for you--no! My darling did for me.'

'Then it was in kindness only. When did she risk her life for you?'

'To save mine on the cliff yonder. The poor child was with me looking at the approach of the Puffin steamboat, and I slipped down. We both had a narrow escape. I wish we had died there!'

'Ah, but wait,' Stephen pleaded with wet eyes. 'She went on that cliff to see me arrive home: she had promised it. She told me she would months before. And would she have gone there if she had not cared for me at all?'

'You have an idea that Elfride died for you, no doubt,' said Knight, with a mournful sarcasm too nerveless to support itself.

'Never mind. If we find that--that she died yours, I'll say no more

ever.'

'And if we find she died yours, I'll say no more.'

'Very well--so it shall be.'

The dark clouds into which the sun had sunk had begun to drop rain in an increasing volume.

'Can we wait somewhere here till this shower is over?' said Stephen desultorily.

'As you will. But it is not worth while. We'll hear the particulars, and return. Don't let people know who we are. I am not much now.'

They had reached a point at which the road branched into two--just outside the west village, one fork of the diverging routes passing into the latter place, the other stretching on to East Endelstow. Having come some of the distance by the footpath, they now found that the hearse was only a little in advance of them.

'I fancy it has turned off to East Endelstow. Can you see?'

'I cannot. You must be mistaken.'

Knight and Stephen entered the village. A bar of fiery light lay across

the road, proceeding from the half-open door of a smithy, in which bellows were heard blowing and a hammer ringing. The rain had increased, and they mechanically turned for shelter towards the warm and cosy scene.

Close at their heels came another man, without over-coat or umbrella, and with a parcel under his arm.

'A wet evening,' he said to the two friends, and passed by them. They stood in the outer penthouse, but the man went in to the fire.

The smith ceased his blowing, and began talking to the man who had entered.

'I have walked all the way from Camelton,' said the latter. 'Was obliged to come to-night, you know.'

He held the parcel, which was a flat one, towards the firelight, to learn if the rain had penetrated it. Resting it edgewise on the forge, he supported it perpendicularly with one hand, wiping his face with the handkerchief he held in the other.

'I suppose you know what I've got here?' he observed to the smith.

'No, I don't,' said the smith, pausing again on his bellows.

'As the rain's not over, I'll show you,' said the bearer.

He laid the thin and broad package, which had acute angles in different directions, flat upon the anvil, and the smith blew up the fire to give him more light. First, after untying the package, a sheet of brown paper was removed: this was laid flat. Then he unfolded a piece of baize: this also he spread flat on the paper. The third covering was a wrapper of tissue paper, which was spread out in its turn. The enclosure was revealed, and he held it up for the smith's inspection.

'Oh--I see!' said the smith, kindling with a chastened interest, and drawing close. 'Poor young lady--ah, terrible melancholy thing--so soon too!'

Knight and Stephen turned their heads and looked.

'And what's that?' continued the smith.

'That's the coronet--beautifully finished, isn't it? Ah, that cost some money!'

'Tis as fine a bit of metal work as ever I see--that 'tis.'

'It came from the same people as the coffin, you know, but was not ready soon enough to be sent round to the house in London yesterday. I've got to fix it on this very night.'

The carefully-packed articles were a coffin-plate and coronet.

Knight and Stephen came forward. The undertaker's man, on seeing them look for the inscription, civilly turned it round towards them, and each read, almost at one moment, by the ruddy light of the coals:

E L F R I D E,
Wife of Spenser Hugo Luxellian,
Fifteenth Baron Luxellian:
Died February 10, 18--.

They read it, and read it, and read it again--Stephen and Knight--as if animated by one soul. Then Stephen put his hand upon Knight's arm, and they retired from the yellow glow, further, further, till the chill darkness enclosed them round, and the quiet sky asserted its presence overhead as a dim grey sheet of blank monotony.

'Where shall we go?' said Stephen.

'I don't know.'

A long silence ensued....'Elfride married!' said Stephen then in a thin whisper, as if he feared to let the assertion loose on the world.

'False,' whispered Knight.

'And dead. Denied us both. I hate "false"--I hate it!'

Knight made no answer.

Nothing was heard by them now save the slow measurement of time by their beating pulses, the soft touch of the dribbling rain upon their clothes, and the low purr of the blacksmith's bellows hard by.

'Shall we follow Elfie any further?' Stephen said.

'No: let us leave her alone. She is beyond our love, and let her be beyond our reproach. Since we don't know half the reasons that made her do as she did, Stephen, how can we say, even now, that she was not pure and true in heart?' Knight's voice had now become mild and gentle as a child's. He went on: 'Can we call her ambitious? No. Circumstance has, as usual, overpowered her purposes--fragile and delicate as she--liable to be overthrown in a moment by the coarse elements of accident. I know that's it,--don't you?'

'It may be--it must be. Let us go on.'

They began to bend their steps towards Castle Boterel, whither they had sent their bags from Camelton. They wandered on in silence for many

minutes. Stephen then paused, and lightly put his hand within Knight's arm.

'I wonder how she came to die,' he said in a broken whisper. 'Shall we return and learn a little more?'

They turned back again, and entering Endelstow a second time, came to a door which was standing open. It was that of an inn called the Welcome Home, and the house appeared to have been recently repaired and entirely modernized. The name too was not that of the same landlord as formerly, but Martin Cannister's.

Knight and Smith entered. The inn was quite silent, and they followed the passage till they reached the kitchen, where a huge fire was burning, which roared up the chimney, and sent over the floor, ceiling, and newly-whitened walls a glare so intense as to make the candle quite a secondary light. A woman in a white apron and black gown was standing there alone behind a cleanly-scrubbed deal table. Stephen first, and Knight afterwards, recognized her as Unity, who had been parlour-maid at the vicarage and young lady's-maid at the Craggs.

'Unity,' said Stephen softly, 'don't you know me?'

She looked inquiringly a moment, and her face cleared up.

'Mr. Smith--ay, that it is!' she said. 'And that's Mr. Knight. I beg you

to sit down. Perhaps you know that since I saw you last I have married Martin Cannister.'

'How long have you been married?'

'About five months. We were married the same day that my dear Miss Elfie became Lady Luxellian.' Tears appeared in Unity's eyes, and filled them, and fell down her cheek, in spite of efforts to the contrary.

The pain of the two men in resolutely controlling themselves when thus exemplified to admit relief of the same kind was distressing. They both turned their backs and walked a few steps away.

Then Unity said, 'Will you go into the parlour, gentlemen?'

'Let us stay here with her,' Knight whispered, and turning said, 'No; we will sit here. We want to rest and dry ourselves here for a time, if you please.'

That evening the sorrowing friends sat with their hostess beside the large fire, Knight in the recess formed by the chimney breast, where he was in shade. And by showing a little confidence they won hers, and she told them what they had stayed to hear--the latter history of poor Elfride.

'One day--after you, Mr. Knight, left us for the last time--she was

missed from the Craggs, and her father went after her, and brought her home ill. Where she went to, I never knew--but she was very unwell for weeks afterwards. And she said to me that she didn't care what became of her, and she wished she could die. When she was better, I said she would live to be married yet, and she said then, "Yes; I'll do anything for the benefit of my family, so as to turn my useless life to some practical account." Well, it began like this about Lord Luxellian courting her. The first Lady Luxellian had died, and he was in great trouble because the little girls were left motherless. After a while they used to come and see her in their little black frocks, for they liked her as well or better than their own mother---that's true. They used to call her "little mamma." These children made her a shade livelier, but she was not the girl she had been--I could see that--and she grew thinner a good deal. Well, my lord got to ask the Swancourts oftener and oftener to dinner--nobody else of his acquaintance--and at last the vicar's family were backwards and forwards at all hours of the day. Well, people say that the little girls asked their father to let Miss Elfride come and live with them, and that he said perhaps he would if they were good children. However, the time went on, and one day I said, "Miss Elfride, you don't look so well as you used to; and though nobody else seems to notice it I do." She laughed a little, and said, "I shall live to be married yet, as you told me."

"Shall you, miss? I am glad to hear that," I said.

"Whom do you think I am going to be married to?" she said again.

"Mr. Knight, I suppose," said I.

"Oh!" she cried, and turned off so white, and afore I could get to her she had sunk down like a heap of clothes, and fainted away. Well, then, she came to herself after a time, and said, "Unity, now we'll go on with our conversation."

"Better not to-day, miss," I said.

"Yes, we will," she said. "Whom do you think I am going to be married to?"

"I don't know," I said this time.

"Guess," she said.

"'Tisn't my lord, is it?" says I.

"Yes, 'tis," says she, in a sick wild way.

"But he don't come courting much," I said.

"Ah! you don't know," she said, and told me 'twas going to be in October. After that she freshened up a bit--whether 'twas with the thought of getting away from home or not, I don't know. For, perhaps, I

may as well speak plainly, and tell you that her home was no home to her now. Her father was bitter to her and harsh upon her; and though Mrs. Swancourt was well enough in her way, 'twas a sort of cold politeness that was not worth much, and the little thing had a worrying time of it altogether. About a month before the wedding, she and my lord and the two children used to ride about together upon horseback, and a very pretty sight they were; and if you'll believe me, I never saw him once with her unless the children were with her too--which made the courting so strange-looking. Ay, and my lord is so handsome, you know, so that at last I think she rather liked him; and I have seen her smile and blush a bit at things he said. He wanted her the more because the children did, for everybody could see that she would be a most tender mother to them, and friend and playmate too. And my lord is not only handsome, but a splendid courter, and up to all the ways o't. So he made her the beautifullest presents; ah, one I can mind--a lovely bracelet, with diamonds and emeralds. Oh, how red her face came when she saw it! The old roses came back to her cheeks for a minute or two then. I helped dress her the day we both were married--it was the last service I did her, poor child! When she was ready, I ran upstairs and slipped on my own wedding gown, and away they went, and away went Martin and I; and no sooner had my lord and my lady been married than the parson married us. It was a very quiet pair of weddings--hardly anybody knew it. Well, hope will hold its own in a young heart, if so be it can; and my lady freshened up a bit, for my lord was SO handsome and kind.'

'How came she to die--and away from home?' murmured Knight.

'Don't you see, sir, she fell off again afore they'd been married long, and my lord took her abroad for change of scene. They were coming home, and had got as far as London, when she was taken very ill and couldn't be moved, and there she died.'

'Was he very fond of her?'

'What, my lord? Oh, he was!'

'VERY fond of her?'

'VERY, beyond everything. Not suddenly, but by slow degrees. 'Twas her nature to win people more when they knew her well. He'd have died for her, I believe. Poor my lord, he's heart-broken now!'

'The funeral is to-morrow?'

'Yes; my husband is now at the vault with the masons, opening the steps and cleaning down the walls.'

The next day two men walked up the familiar valley from Castle Boterel to East Endelstow Church. And when the funeral was over, and every one had left the lawn-like churchyard, the pair went softly down the steps

of the Luxellian vault, and under the low-groined arches they had beheld once before, lit up then as now. In the new niche of the crypt lay a rather new coffin, which had lost some of its lustre, and a newer coffin still, bright and untarnished in the slightest degree.

Beside the latter was the dark form of a man, kneeling on the damp floor, his body flung across the coffin, his hands clasped, and his whole frame seemingly given up in utter abandonment to grief. He was still young--younger, perhaps, than Knight--and even now showed how graceful was his figure and symmetrical his build. He murmured a prayer half aloud, and was quite unconscious that two others were standing within a few yards of him.

Knight and Stephen had advanced to where they once stood beside Elfride on the day all three had met there, before she had herself gone down into silence like her ancestors, and shut her bright blue eyes for ever. Not until then did they see the kneeling figure in the dim light. Knight instantly recognized the mourner as Lord Luxellian, the bereaved husband of Elfride.

They felt themselves to be intruders. Knight pressed Stephen back, and they silently withdrew as they had entered.

'Come away,' he said, in a broken voice. 'We have no right to be there. Another stands before us--nearer to her than we!'

And side by side they both retraced their steps down the grey still valley to Castle Boterel.