

CHAPTER IV. 1859-1868.

Fleeming's Marriage - His Married Life - Professional Difficulties
- Life at Claygate - Illness of Mrs. F. Jenkin; and of Fleeming -
Appointment to the Chair at Edinburgh.

ON Saturday, Feb. 26, 1859, profiting by a holiday of four days, Fleeming was married to Miss Austin at Northiam: a place connected not only with his own family but with that of his bride as well. By Tuesday morning, he was at work again, fitting out cables at Birkenhead. Of the walk from his lodgings to the works, I find a graphic sketch in one of his letters: 'Out over the railway bridge, along a wide road raised to the level of a ground floor above the land, which, not being built upon, harbours puddles, ponds, pigs, and Irish hovels; - so to the dock warehouses, four huge piles of building with no windows, surrounded by a wall about twelve feet high - in through the large gates, round which hang twenty or thirty rusty Irish, playing pitch and toss and waiting for employment; - on along the railway, which came in at the same gates and which branches down between each vast block - past a pilot-engine butting refractory trucks into their places - on to the last block, [and] down the branch, sniffing the guano-scented air and detecting the old bones. The hartshorn flavour of the

guano becomes very strong, as I near the docks where, across the ELBA'S decks, a huge vessel is discharging her cargo of the brown dust, and where huge vessels have been discharging that same cargo for the last five months.' This was the walk he took his young wife on the morrow of his return. She had been used to the society of lawyers and civil servants, moving in that circle which seems to itself the pivot of the nation and is in truth only a clique like another; and Fleeming was to her the nameless assistant of a nameless firm of engineers, doing his inglorious business, as she now saw for herself, among unsavoury surroundings. But when their walk brought them within view of the river, she beheld a sight to her of the most novel beauty: four great, sea-going ships dressed out with flags. 'How lovely!' she cried. 'What is it for?' - 'For you,' said Fleeming. Her surprise was only equalled by her pleasure. But perhaps, for what we may call private fame, there is no life like that of the engineer; who is a great man in out-of-the-way places, by the dockside or on the desert island or in populous ships, and remains quite unheard of in the coteries of London. And Fleeming had already made his mark among the few who had an opportunity of knowing him.

His marriage was the one decisive incident of his career; from that moment until the day of his death, he had one thought to which all the rest were tributary, the thought of his wife. No one could know him even slightly, and not remark the absorbing greatness of that sentiment; nor can any picture of the man be drawn that does

not in proportion dwell upon it. This is a delicate task; but if we are to leave behind us (as we wish) some presentment of the friend we have lost, it is a task that must be undertaken.

For all his play of mind and fancy, for all his indulgence - and, as time went on, he grew indulgent - Fleeming had views of duty that were even stern. He was too shrewd a student of his fellow-men to remain long content with rigid formulae of conduct. Iron-bound, impersonal ethics, the procrustean bed of rules, he soon saw at their true value as the deification of averages. 'As to Miss (I declare I forget her name) being bad,' I find him writing, 'people only mean that she has broken the Decalogue - which is not at all the same thing. People who have kept in the high-road of Life really have less opportunity for taking a comprehensive view of it than those who have leaped over the hedges and strayed up the hills; not but what the hedges are very necessary, and our stray travellers often have a weary time of it. So, you may say, have those in the dusty roads.' Yet he was himself a very stern respecter of the hedgerows; sought safety and found dignity in the obvious path of conduct; and would palter with no simple and recognised duty of his epoch. Of marriage in particular, of the bond so formed, of the obligations incurred, of the debt men owe to their children, he conceived in a truly antique spirit: not to blame others, but to constrain himself. It was not to blame, I repeat, that he held these views; for others, he could make a large allowance; and yet he tacitly expected of his friends and his wife

a high standard of behaviour. Nor was it always easy to wear the armour of that ideal.

Acting upon these beliefs; conceiving that he had indeed 'given himself (in the full meaning of these words) for better, for worse; painfully alive to his defects of temper and deficiency in charm; resolute to make up for these; thinking last of himself: Fleeming was in some ways the very man to have made a noble, uphill fight of an unfortunate marriage. In other ways, it is true he was one of the most unfit for such a trial. And it was his beautiful destiny to remain to the last hour the same absolute and romantic lover, who had shown to his new bride the flag-draped vessels in the Mersey. No fate is altogether easy; but trials are our touchstone, trials overcome our reward; and it was given to Fleeming to conquer. It was given to him to live for another, not as a task, but till the end as an enchanting pleasure. 'People may write novels,' he wrote in 1869, 'and other people may write poems, but not a man or woman among them can write to say how happy a man may be, who is desperately in love with his wife after ten years of marriage.' And again in 1885, after more than twenty-six years of marriage, and within but five weeks of his death: 'Your first letter from Bournemouth,' he wrote, 'gives me heavenly pleasure - for which I thank Heaven and you too - who are my heaven on earth.' The mind hesitates whether to say that such a man has been more good or more fortunate.

Any woman (it is the defect of her sex) comes sooner to the stable mind of maturity than any man; and Jenkin was to the end of a most deliberate growth. In the next chapter, when I come to deal with his telegraphic voyages and give some taste of his correspondence, the reader will still find him at twenty-five an arrant school-boy. His wife besides was more thoroughly educated than he. In many ways she was able to teach him, and he proud to be taught; in many ways she outshone him, and he delighted to be outshone. All these superiorities, and others that, after the manner of lovers, he no doubt forged for himself, added as time went on to the humility of his original love. Only once, in all I know of his career, did he show a touch of smallness. He could not learn to sing correctly; his wife told him so and desisted from her lessons; and the mortification was so sharply felt that for years he could not be induced to go to a concert, instanced himself as a typical man without an ear, and never sang again. I tell it; for the fact that this stood singular in his behaviour, and really amazed all who knew him, is the happiest way I can imagine to commend the tenor of his simplicity; and because it illustrates his feeling for his wife. Others were always welcome to laugh at him; if it amused them, or if it amused him, he would proceed undisturbed with his occupation, his vanity invulnerable. With his wife it was different: his wife had laughed at his singing; and for twenty years the fibre ached. Nothing, again, was more notable than the formal chivalry of this unmannered man to the person on earth with whom he was the most familiar. He was conscious of his own innate

and often rasping vivacity and roughness and he was never forgetful of his first visit to the Austins and the vow he had registered on his return. There was thus an artificial element in his punctilio that at times might almost raise a smile. But it stood on noble grounds; for this was how he sought to shelter from his own petulance the woman who was to him the symbol of the household and to the end the beloved of his youth.

I wish in this chapter to chronicle small beer; taking a hasty glance at some ten years of married life and of professional struggle; and reserving till the next all the more interesting matter of his cruises. Of his achievements and their worth, it is not for me to speak: his friend and partner, Sir William Thomson, has contributed a note on the subject, which will be found in the Appendix, and to which I must refer the reader. He is to conceive in the meanwhile for himself Fleeming's manifold engagements: his service on the Committee on Electrical Standards, his lectures on electricity at Chatham, his chair at the London University, his partnership with Sir William Thomson and Mr. Varley in many ingenious patents, his growing credit with engineers and men of science; and he is to bear in mind that of all this activity and acquist of reputation, the immediate profit was scanty. Soon after his marriage, Fleeming had left the service of Messrs. Liddell & Gordon, and entered into a general engineering partnership with Mr. Forde, a gentleman in a good way of business. It was a fortunate partnership in this, that the parties retained their

mutual respect unlesened and separated with regret; but men's affairs, like men, have their times of sickness, and by one of these unaccountable variations, for hard upon ten years the business was disappointing and the profits meagre. 'Inditing drafts of German railways which will never get made': it is thus I find Fleeming, not without a touch of bitterness, describe his occupation. Even the patents hung fire at first. There was no salary to rely on; children were coming and growing up; the prospect was often anxious. In the days of his courtship, Fleeming had written to Miss Austin a dissuasive picture of the trials of poverty, assuring her these were no figments but truly bitter to support; he told her this, he wrote, beforehand, so that when the pinch came and she suffered, she should not be disappointed in herself nor tempted to doubt her own magnanimity: a letter of admirable wisdom and solicitude. But now that the trouble came, he bore it very lightly. It was his principle, as he once prettily expressed it, 'to enjoy each day's happiness, as it arises, like birds or children.' His optimism, if driven out at the door, would come in again by the window; if it found nothing but blackness in the present, would hit upon some ground of consolation in the future or the past. And his courage and energy were indefatigable. In the year 1863, soon after the birth of their first son, they moved into a cottage at Claygate near Esher; and about this time, under manifold troubles both of money and health, I find him writing from abroad: 'The country will give us, please God, health and strength. I will love and cherish you more than ever, you

shall go where you wish, you shall receive whom you wish - and as for money you shall have that too. I cannot be mistaken. I have now measured myself with many men. I do not feel weak, I do not feel that I shall fail. In many things I have succeeded, and I will in this. And meanwhile the time of waiting, which, please Heaven, shall not be long, shall also not be so bitter. Well, well, I promise much, and do not know at this moment how you and the dear child are. If he is but better, courage, my girl, for I see light.'

This cottage at Claygate stood just without the village, well surrounded with trees and commanding a pleasant view. A piece of the garden was turfed over to form a croquet green, and Fleeming became (I need scarce say) a very ardent player. He grew ardent, too, in gardening. This he took up at first to please his wife, having no natural inclination; but he had no sooner set his hand to it, than, like everything else he touched, it became with him a passion. He budded roses, he potted cuttings in the coach-house; if there came a change of weather at night, he would rise out of bed to protect his favourites; when he was thrown with a dull companion, it was enough for him to discover in the man a fellow gardener; on his travels, he would go out of his way to visit nurseries and gather hints; and to the end of his life, after other occupations prevented him putting his own hand to the spade, he drew up a yearly programme for his gardener, in which all details were regulated. He had begun by this time to write. His paper on

Darwin, which had the merit of convincing on one point the philosopher himself, had indeed been written before this in London lodgings; but his pen was not idle at Claygate; and it was here he wrote (among other things) that review of 'FECUNDITY, FERTILITY, STERILITY, AND ALLIED TOPICS,' which Dr. Matthews Duncan prefixed by way of introduction to the second edition of the work. The mere act of writing seems to cheer the vanity of the most incompetent; but a correction accepted by Darwin, and a whole review borrowed and reprinted by Matthews Duncan are compliments of a rare strain, and to a man still unsuccessful must have been precious indeed. There was yet a third of the same kind in store for him; and when Munro himself owned that he had found instruction in the paper on Lucretius, we may say that Fleeming had been crowned in the capitol of reviewing.

Croquet, charades, Christmas magic lanterns for the village children, an amateur concert or a review article in the evening; plenty of hard work by day; regular visits to meetings of the British Association, from one of which I find him characteristically writing: 'I cannot say that I have had any amusement yet, but I am enjoying the dulness and dry bustle of the whole thing'; occasional visits abroad on business, when he would find the time to glean (as I have said) gardening hints for himself, and old folk-songs or new fashions of dress for his wife; and the continual study and care of his children: these were the chief elements of his life. Nor were friends wanting. Captain and

Mrs. Jenkin, Mr. and Mrs. Austin, Clerk Maxwell, Miss Bell of Manchester, and others came to them on visits. Mr. Hertslet of the Foreign Office, his wife and his daughter, were neighbours and proved kind friends; in 1867 the Howitts came to Claygate and sought the society of 'the two bright, clever young people'; and in a house close by, Mr. Frederick Ricketts came to live with his family. Mr. Ricketts was a valued friend during his short life; and when he was lost with every circumstance of heroism in the LA PLATA, Fleeming mourned him sincerely.

I think I shall give the best idea of Fleeming in this time of his early married life, by a few sustained extracts from his letters to his wife, while she was absent on a visit in 1864.

'NOV. 11. - Sunday was too wet to walk to Isleworth, for which I was sorry, so I staid and went to Church and thought of you at Ardwick all through the Commandments, and heard Dr. - expound in a remarkable way a prophecy of St. Paul's about Roman Catholics, which MUTATIS MUTANDIS would do very well for Protestants in some parts. Then I made a little nursery of Borecole and Enfield market cabbage, grubbing in wet earth with leggings and gray coat on. Then I tidied up the coach-house to my own and Christine's admiration. Then encouraged by BOUTS-RIMES I wrote you a copy of verses; high time I think; I shall just save my tenth year of knowing my lady-love without inditing poetry or rhymes to her.

'Then I rummaged over the box with my father's letters and found interesting notes from myself. One I should say my first letter, which little Austin I should say would rejoice to see and shall see - with a drawing of a cottage and a spirited "cob." What was more to the purpose, I found with it a paste-cutter which Mary begged humbly for Christine and I generously gave this morning.

'Then I read some of Congreve. There are admirable scenes in the manner of Sheridan; all wit and no character, or rather one character in a great variety of situations and scenes. I could show you some scenes, but others are too coarse even for my stomach hardened by a course of French novels.

'All things look so happy for the rain.

'NOV. 16. - Verbenas looking well. . . . I am but a poor creature without you; I have naturally no spirit or fun or enterprise in me. Only a kind of mechanical capacity for ascertaining whether two really is half four, etc.; but when you are near me I can fancy that I too shine, and vainly suppose it to be my proper light; whereas by my extreme darkness when you are not by, it clearly can only be by a reflected brilliance that I seem aught but dull. Then for the moral part of me: if it were not for you and little Odden, I should feel by no means sure that I had any affection power in me. . . . Even the muscular me suffers a sad deterioration in your absence. I don't get up when I ought to, I have snoozed in my

chair after dinner; I do not go in at the garden with my wonted vigour, and feel ten times as tired as usual with a walk in your absence; so you see, when you are not by, I am a person without ability, affections or vigour, but droop dull, selfish, and spiritless; can you wonder that I love you?

'NOV. 17. - . . . I am very glad we married young. I would not have missed these five years, no, not for any hopes; they are my own.

'NOV. 30. - I got through my Chatham lecture very fairly though almost all my apparatus went astray. I dined at the mess, and got home to Isleworth the same evening; your father very kindly sitting up for me.

'DEC. 1. - Back at dear Claygate. Many cuttings flourish, especially those which do honour to your hand. Your Californian annuals are up and about. Badger is fat, the grass green. . . .

'DEC. 3. - Odden will not talk of you, while you are away, having inherited, as I suspect, his father's way of declining to consider a subject which is painful, as your absence is. . . . I certainly should like to learn Greek and I think it would be a capital pastime for the long winter evenings. . . . How things are misrated! I declare croquet is a noble occupation compared to the pursuits of business men. As for so-called idleness - that is, one

form of it - I vow it is the noblest aim of man. When idle, one can love, one can be good, feel kindly to all, devote oneself to others, be thankful for existence, educate one's mind, one's heart, one's body. When busy, as I am busy now or have been busy to-day, one feels just as you sometimes felt when you were too busy, owing to want of servants.

'DEC. 5. - On Sunday I was at Isleworth, chiefly engaged in playing with Odden. We had the most enchanting walk together through the brickfields. It was very muddy, and, as he remarked, not fit for Nanna, but fit for us MEN. The dreary waste of bared earth, thatched sheds and standing water, was a paradise to him; and when we walked up planks to deserted mixing and crushing mills, and actually saw where the clay was stirred with long iron prongs, and chalk or lime ground with "a kind of a mill," his expression of contentment and triumphant heroism knew no limit to its beauty. Of course on returning I found Mrs. Austin looking out at the door in an anxious manner, and thinking we had been out quite long enough. . . . I am reading Don Quixote chiefly and am his fervent admirer, but I am so sorry he did not place his affections on a Dulcinea of somewhat worthier stamp. In fact I think there must be a mistake about it. Don Quixote might and would serve his lady in most preposterous fashion, but I am sure he would have chosen a lady of merit. He imagined her to be such no doubt, and drew a charming picture of her occupations by the banks of the river; but in his other imaginations, there was some kind of peg on which to hang the

false costumes he created; windmills are big, and wave their arms like giants; sheep in the distance are somewhat like an army; a little boat on the river-side must look much the same whether enchanted or belonging to millers; but except that Dulcinea is a woman, she bears no resemblance at all to the damsel of his imagination.'

At the time of these letters, the oldest son only was born to them. In September of the next year, with the birth of the second, Charles Frewen, there befell Fleeming a terrible alarm and what proved to be a lifelong misfortune. Mrs. Jenkin was taken suddenly and alarmingly ill; Fleeming ran a matter of two miles to fetch the doctor, and, drenched with sweat as he was, returned with him at once in an open gig. On their arrival at the house, Mrs. Jenkin half unconsciously took and kept hold of her husband's hand. By the doctor's orders, windows and doors were set open to create a thorough draught, and the patient was on no account to be disturbed. Thus, then, did Fleeming pass the whole of that night, crouching on the floor in the draught, and not daring to move lest he should wake the sleeper. He had never been strong; energy had stood him instead of vigour; and the result of that night's exposure was flying rheumatism varied by settled sciatica. Sometimes it quite disabled him, sometimes it was less acute; but he was rarely free from it until his death. I knew him for many years; for more than ten we were closely intimate; I have lived with him for weeks; and during all this time, he only once referred

to his infirmity and then perforce as an excuse for some trouble he put me to, and so slightly worded that I paid no heed. This is a good measure of his courage under sufferings of which none but the untried will think lightly. And I think it worth noting how this optimist was acquainted with pain. It will seem strange only to the superficial. The disease of pessimism springs never from real troubles, which it braces men to bear, which it delights men to bear well. Nor does it readily spring at all, in minds that have conceived of life as a field of ordered duties, not as a chase in which to hunt for gratifications. 'We are not here to be happy, but to be good'; I wish he had mended the phrase: 'We are not here to be happy, but to try to be good,' comes nearer the modesty of truth. With such old-fashioned morality, it is possible to get through life, and see the worst of it, and feel some of the worst of it, and still acquiesce piously and even gladly in man's fate. Feel some of the worst of it, I say; for some of the rest of the worst is, by this simple faith, excluded.

It was in the year 1868, that the clouds finally rose. The business in partnership with Mr. Forde began suddenly to pay well; about the same time the patents showed themselves a valuable property; and but a little after, Fleeming was appointed to the new chair of engineering in the University of Edinburgh. Thus, almost at once, pecuniary embarrassments passed for ever out of his life. Here is his own epilogue to the time at Claygate, and his anticipations of the future in Edinburgh.

' The dear old house at Claygate is not let and the pretty garden a mass of weeds. I feel rather as if we had behaved unkindly to them. We were very happy there, but now that it is over I am conscious of the weight of anxiety as to money which I bore all the time. With you in the garden, with Austin in the coach-house, with pretty songs in the little, low white room, with the moonlight in the dear room up-stairs, ah, it was perfect; but the long walk, wondering, pondering, fearing, scheming, and the dusty jolting railway, and the horrid fusty office with its endless disappointments, they are well gone. It is well enough to fight and scheme and bustle about in the eager crowd here [in London] for a while now and then, but not for a lifetime. What I have now is just perfect. Study for winter, action for summer, lovely country for recreation, a pleasant town for talk . . . '

CHAPTER V. - NOTES OF TELEGRAPH VOYAGES, 1858 TO 1873.

BUT it is now time to see Jenkin at his life's work. I have before me certain imperfect series of letters written, as he says, 'at hazard, for one does not know at the time what is important and what is not': the earlier addressed to Miss Austin, after the betrothal; the later to Mrs. Jenkin the young wife. I should premise that I have allowed myself certain editorial freedoms,