A Pair of Blue Eyes

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Preface

The following chapters were written at a time when the craze for indiscriminate church-restoration had just reached the remotest nooks of western England, where the wild and tragic features of the coast had long combined in perfect harmony with the crude Gothic Art of the ecclesiastical buildings scattered along it, throwing into extraordinary discord all architectural attempts at newness there. To restore the grey carcases of a mediaevalism whose spirit had fled, seemed a not less incongruous act than to set about renovating the adjoining crags themselves.

Hence it happened that an imaginary history of three human hearts, whose emotions were not without correspondence with these material circumstances, found in the ordinary incidents of such church-renovations a fitting frame for its presentation. The shore and country about 'Castle Boterel' is now getting well known, and will be readily recognized. The spot is, I may add, the furthest westward of all those convenient corners wherein I have ventured to erect my theatre for these imperfect little dramas of country life and passions; and it lies near to, or no great way beyond, the vague border of the Wessex kingdom on that side, which, like the westering verge of modern American settlements, was progressive and uncertain.

This, however, is of little importance. The place is pre-eminently (for one person at least) the region of dream and mystery. The ghostly birds, the pall-like sea, the frothy wind, the eternal soliloquy of the waters, the bloom of dark purple cast, that seems to exhale from the shoreward precipices, in themselves lend to the scene an atmosphere like the twilight of a night vision.

One enormous sea-bord cliff in particular figures in the narrative; and for some forgotten reason or other this cliff was described in the story as being without a name. Accuracy would require the statement to be that a remarkable cliff which resembles in many points the cliff of the description bears a name that no event has made famous.

T. H.

March 1899
THE PERSONS

ELFRIDE SWANCOURT a young Lady

CHRISTOPHER SWANCOURT a Clergyman

STEPHEN SMITH an Architect

HENRY KNIGHT a Reviewer and Essayist

CHARLOTTE TROYTON a rich Widow

GERTRUDE JETHWAY a poor Widow

SPENSER HUGO LUXELLIAN a Peer

LADY LUXELLIAN his Wife

MARY AND KATE two little Girls

WILLIAM WORM a dazed Factotum

JOHN SMITH a Master-mason

JANE SMITH his Wife

MARTIN CANNISTER a Sexton

UNITY a Maid-servant

Other servants, masons, labourers, grooms, nondescripts, etc., etc.

THE SCENE

Mostly on the outskirts of Lower Wessex.

Chapter 1

'A fair vestal, throned in the west'

Elfride Swancourt was a girl whose emotions lay very near the surface. Their nature more precisely, and as modified by the creeping hours of time, was known only to those who watched the circumstances of her history.

Personally, she was the combination of very interesting particulars, whose rarity, however, lay in the combination itself rather than in the individual elements combined. As a matter of fact, you did not see the form and substance of her features when conversing with her; and this charming power of preventing a material study of her lineaments by an interlocutor, originated not in the cloaking effect of a well-formed manner (for her manner was childish and scarcely formed), but in the attractive crudeness of the remarks themselves. She had lived all her life in retirement—the monstrari gigito of idle men had not flattered her, and at the age of nineteen or twenty she was no further on in social consciousness than an urban young lady of fifteen.

One point in her, however, you did notice: that was her eyes. In them was seen a sublimation of all of her; it was not necessary to look further: there she lived.

These eyes were blue; blue as autumn distance—blue as the blue we see between the retreating mouldings of hills and woody slopes on a sunny September morning. A misty and shady blue, that had no beginning or surface, and was looked INTO rather than AT.

As to her presence, it was not powerful; it was weak. Some women can make their personality pervade the atmosphere of a whole banqueting hall; Elfride's was no more pervasive than that of a kitten.

Elfride had as her own the thoughtfulness which appears in the face of the Madonna della Sedia, without its rapture: the warmth and spirit of the type of woman's feature most common to the beauties—mortal and immortal—of Rubens, without their insistent fleshiness. The characteristic expression of the female faces of Correggio—that of the yearning human thoughts that lie too deep for tears—was hers sometimes, but seldom under ordinary conditions.

The point in Elfride Swancourt's life at which a deeper current may be said to have permanently set in, was one winter afternoon when she found herself standing, in the character of hostess, face to face with a man she had never seen before—moreover, looking at him with a Miranda-like curiosity and interest that she had never yet bestowed on a mortal.

On this particular day her father, the vicar of a parish on the sea-swept outskirts of Lower Wessex, and a widower, was suffering from an attack

of gout. After finishing her household supervisions Elfride became restless, and several times left the room, ascended the staircase, and knocked at her father's chamber-door.
'Come in!' was always answered in a hearty out-of-door voice from the inside.
'Papa,' she said on one occasion to the fine, red-faced, handsome man of forty, who, puffing and fizzing like a bursting bottle, lay on the bed wrapped in a dressing-gown, and every now and then enunciating, in spite of himself, about one letter of some word or words that were almost oaths; 'papa, will you not come downstairs this evening?' She spoke distinctly: he was rather deaf.
'Afraid not—eh-hh!—very much afraid I shall not, Elfride. Piph-ph-ph! I can't bear even a handkerchief upon this deuced toe of mine, much less a stocking or slipper—piph-ph-ph! There 'tis again! No, I shan't get up till to-morrow.'
'Then I hope this London man won't come; for I don't know what I should do, papa.'
'Well, it would be awkward, certainly.'
'I should hardly think he would come to-day.'
'Why?'
'Because the wind blows so.'
'Wind! What ideas you have, Elfride! Who ever heard of wind stopping a man from doing his business? The idea of this toe of mine coming on so suddenly!...If he should come, you must send him up to me, I suppose, and then give him some food and put him to bed in some way. Dear me, what a nuisance all this is!'
'Must he have dinner?'
'Too heavy for a tired man at the end of a tedious journey.'
'Tea, then?'
'Not substantial enough.'
'High tea, then? There is cold fowl, rabbit-pie, some pasties, and things of that kind.'
'Yes, high tea.'
'Must I pour out his tea, papa?'
'Of course; you are the mistress of the house.'
'What! sit there all the time with a stranger, just as if I knew him, and not anybody to introduce us?'
'Nonsense, child, about introducing; you know better than that. A practical professional man, tired and hungry, who has been travelling ever since daylight this morning, will hardly be inclined to talk and air courtesies to-night. He wants food and shelter, and you must see that he has it, simply because I am suddenly laid up and cannot. There is nothing so dreadful in that, I hope? You get all kinds of stuff into your head from reading so many of those novels.'

'Oh no; there is nothing dreadful in it when it becomes plainly a case of necessity like this. But, you see, you are always there when people come to dinner, even if we know them; and this is some strange London man of the world, who will think it odd, perhaps.'
'Very well; let him.'
'Is he Mr. Hewby's partner?'
'I should scarcely think so: he may be.'
'How old is he, I wonder?'
'That I cannot tell. You will find the copy of my letter to Mr. Hewby, and his answer, upon the table in the study. You may read them, and then you'll know as much as I do about our visitor.'
'I have read them.'
'Well, what's the use of asking questions, then? They contain all I know. Ugh-h-h!...Od plague you, you young scamp! don't put anything there! I can't bear the weight of a fly.'
'Oh, I am sorry, papa. I forgot; I thought you might be cold,' she said, hastily removing the rug she had thrown upon the feet of the sufferer; and waiting till she saw that consciousness of her offence had passed from his face, she withdrew from the room, and retired again downstairs.

Chapter 2

'Twas on the evening of a winter's day.'

When two or three additional hours had merged the same afternoon in evening, some moving outlines might have been observed against the sky on the summit of a wild lone hill in that district. They circumscribed two men, having at present the aspect of silhouettes, sitting in a dog-cart and pushing along in the teeth of the wind. Scarcely a solitary house or man had been visible along the whole dreary distance of open country they were traversing; and now that night had begun to fall, the faint twilight, which still gave an idea of the landscape to their observation, was enlivened by the quiet appearance of the planet Jupiter, momentarily gleaming in intenser brilliancy in front of them, and by Sirius shedding his rays in rivalry from his position over their shoulders. The only lights apparent on earth were some spots of dull red, glowing here and there upon the distant hills, which, as the driver of the vehicle gratuitously remarked to the hirer, were smouldering fires for the consumption of peat and gorse-roots, where the common was being broken up for agricultural purposes. The wind prevailed with but little abatement from its daytime boisterousness, three or four small clouds, delicate and pale, creeping along under the sky southward to the Channel.

Fourteen of the sixteen miles intervening between the railway terminus and the end of their journey had been gone over, when they began to pass along the brink of a valley some miles in extent, wherein the wintry skeletons of a more luxuriant vegetation than had hitherto surrounded them proclaimed an increased richness of soil, which showed signs of far more careful enclosure and management than had any slopes they had yet passed. A little farther, and an opening in the elms stretching up from this fertile valley revealed a mansion.

'That's Endelstow House, Lord Luxellian's,' said the driver.

'Endelstow House, Lord Luxellian's,' repeated the other mechanically. He then turned himself sideways, and keenly scrutinized the almost invisible house with an interest which the indistinct picture itself seemed far from adequate to create. 'Yes, that's Lord Luxellian's,' he said yet again after a while, as he still looked in the same direction.

'What, be we going there?'

'No; Endelstow Vicarage, as I have told you.'

'I thought you m't have altered your mind, sir, as ye have stared that way at nothing so long.'

'Oh no; I am interested in the house, that's all.'

'Most people be, as the saying is.'

'Not in the sense that I am.'
'Oh!...Well, his family is no better than my own, 'a b'lieve.'
'How is that?'
'Hedgers and ditchers by rights. But once in ancient times one of 'em, when he was at work, changed clothes with King Charles the Second, and saved the king's life. King Charles came up to him like a common man, and said off-hand, "Man in the smock-frock, my name is Charles the Second, and that's the truth on't. Will you lend me your clothes?" "I don't mind if I do," said Hedger Luxellian; and they changed there and then. "Now mind ye," King Charles the Second said, like a common man, as he rode away, "if ever I come to the crown, you come to court, knock at the door, and say out bold, 'Is King Charles the Second at home?' Tell your name, and they shall let you in, and you shall be made a lord." Now, that was very nice of Master Charley?'
'Very nice indeed.'
'Well, as the story is, the king came to the throne; and some years after that, away went Hedger Luxellian, knocked at the king's door, and asked if King Charles the Second was in. "No, he isn't," they said. "Then, is Charles the Third?" said Hedger Luxellian. "Yes," said a young feller standing by like a common man, only he had a crown on, "my name is Charles the Third." And——'
'I really fancy that must be a mistake. I don't recollect anything in English history about Charles the Third,' said the other in a tone of mild remonstrance.
'Oh, that's right history enough, only 'twasn't prented; he was rather a queer-tempered man, if you remember.'
'Very well; go on.'
'And, by hook or by crook, Hedger Luxellian was made a lord, and everything went on well till some time after, when he got into a most terrible row with King Charles the Fourth.
'I can't stand Charles the Fourth. Upon my word, that's too much.'
'Why? There was a George the Fourth, wasn't there?'
'Certainly.'
'Well, Charleses be as common as Georges. However I'll say no more about it....Ah, well! 'tis the funniest world ever I lived in—upon my life 'tis. Ah, that such should be!'
The dusk had thickened into darkness while they thus conversed, and the outline and surface of the mansion gradually disappeared. The windows, which had before been as black blots on a lighter expanse of wall, became illuminated, and were transfigured to squares of light on the general dark body of the night landscape as it absorbed the outlines of the edifice into its gloomy monochrome.
Not another word was spoken for some time, and they climbed a hill, then another hill piled on the summit of the first. An additional mile of plateau followed, from which could be discerned two light-houses on the

coast they were nearing, reposing on the horizon with a calm lustre of benignity. Another oasis was reached; a little dell lay like a nest at their feet, towards which the driver pulled the horse at a sharp angle, and descended a steep slope which dived under the trees like a rabbit's burrow. They sank lower and lower.
'Endelstow Vicarage is inside here,' continued the man with the reins. 'This part about here is West Endelstow; Lord Luxellian's is East Endelstow, and has a church to itself. Pa'son Swancourt is the pa'son of both, and bobs backward and forward. Ah, well! 'tis a funny world. 'A b'lieve there was once a quarry where this house stands. The man who built it in past time scraped all the glebe for earth to put round the vicarage, and laid out a little paradise of flowers and trees in the soil he had got together in this way, whilst the fields he scraped have been good for nothing ever since.'
'How long has the present incumbent been here?'
'Maybe about a year, or a year and half: 'tisn't two years; for they don't scandalize him yet; and, as a rule, a parish begins to scandalize the pa'son at the end of two years among 'em familiar. But he's a very nice party. Ay, Pa'son Swancourt knows me pretty well from often driving over; and I know Pa'son Swancourt.'
They emerged from the bower, swept round in a curve, and the chimneys and gables of the vicarage became darkly visible. Not a light showed anywhere. They alighted; the man felt his way into the porch, and rang the bell.
At the end of three or four minutes, spent in patient waiting without hearing any sounds of a response, the stranger advanced and repeated the call in a more decided manner. He then fancied he heard footsteps in the hall, and sundry movements of the door-knob, but nobody appeared.
'Perhaps they beant at home,' sighed the driver. 'And I promised myself a bit of supper in Pa'son Swancourt's kitchen. Sich lovely mate-pize and figged keakes, and cider, and drops o' cordial that they do keep here!'
'All right, naibours! Be ye rich men or be ye poor men, that ye must needs come to the world's end at this time o' night?' exclaimed a voice at this instant; and, turning their heads, they saw a rickety individual shambling round from the back door with a horn lantern dangling from his hand.
'Time o' night, 'a b'lieve! and the clock only gone seven of 'em. Show a light, and let us in, William Worm.'
'Oh, that you, Robert Lickpan?'
'Nobody else, William Worm.'
'And is the visiting man a-come?'
'Yes,' said the stranger. 'Is Mr. Swancourt at home?'
'That 'a is, sir. And would ye mind coming round by the back way? The front door is got stuck wi' the wet, as he will do sometimes; and the Turk

can't open en. I know I am only a poor wambling man that 'ill never pay the Lord for my making, sir; but I can show the way in, sir.'
The new arrival followed his guide through a little door in a wall, and then promenaded a scullery and a kitchen, along which he passed with eyes rigidly fixed in advance, an inbred horror of prying forbidding him to gaze around apartments that formed the back side of the household tapestry. Entering the hall, he was about to be shown to his room, when from the inner lobby of the front entrance, whither she had gone to learn the cause of the delay, sailed forth the form of Elfride. Her start of amazement at the sight of the visitor coming forth from under the stairs proved that she had not been expecting this surprising flank movement, which had been originated entirely by the ingenuity of William Worm. She appeared in the prettiest of all feminine guises, that is to say, in demi-toilette, with plenty of loose curly hair tumbling down about her shoulders. An expression of uneasiness pervaded her countenance; and altogether she scarcely appeared woman enough for the situation. The visitor removed his hat, and the first words were spoken; Elfride prelusively looking with a deal of interest, not unmixed with surprise, at the person towards whom she was to do the duties of hospitality.
'I am Mr. Smith,' said the stranger in a musical voice.
'I am Miss Swancourt,' said Elfride.
Her constraint was over. The great contrast between the reality she beheld before her, and the dark, taciturn, sharp, elderly man of business who had lurked in her imagination—a man with clothes smelling of city smoke, skin sallow from want of sun, and talk flavoured with epigram—was such a relief to her that Elfride smiled, almost laughed, in the new-comer's face.
Stephen Smith, who has hitherto been hidden from us by the darkness, was at this time of his life but a youth in appearance, and barely a man in years. Judging from his look, London was the last place in the world that one would have imagined to be the scene of his activities: such a face surely could not be nourished amid smoke and mud and fog and dust; such an open countenance could never even have seen anything of 'the weariness, the fever, and the fret' of Babylon the Second.
His complexion was as fine as Elfride's own; the pink of his cheeks as delicate. His mouth as perfect as Cupid's bow in form, and as cherry-red in colour as hers. Bright curly hair; bright sparkling blue-gray eyes; a boy's blush and manner; neither whisker nor moustache, unless a little light-brown fur on his upper lip deserved the latter title: this composed the London professional man, the prospect of whose advent had so troubled Elfride.
Elfride hastened to say she was sorry to tell him that Mr. Swancourt was not able to receive him that evening, and gave the reason why. Mr. Smith replied, in a voice boyish by nature and manly by art, that he was

very sorry to hear this news; but that as far as his reception was concerned, it did not matter in the least.
Stephen was shown up to his room. In his absence Elfride stealthily glided into her father's.
'He's come, papa. Such a young man for a business man!'
'Oh, indeed!'
'His face is—well—PRETTY; just like mine.'
'H'm! what next?'
'Nothing; that's all I know of him yet. It is rather nice, is it not?'
'Well, we shall see that when we know him better. Go down and give the poor fellow something to eat and drink, for Heaven's sake. And when he has done eating, say I should like to have a few words with him, if he doesn't mind coming up here.'
The young lady glided downstairs again, and whilst she awaits young Smith's entry, the letters referring to his visit had better be given.
1.—MR. SWANCOURT TO MR. HEWBY.
'ENDELSTOW VICARAGE, Feb. 18, 18—.
'SIR,—We are thinking of restoring the tower and aisle of the church in this parish; and Lord Luxellian, the patron of the living, has mentioned your name as that of a trustworthy architect whom it would be desirable to ask to superintend the work.
'I am exceedingly ignorant of the necessary preliminary steps. Probably, however, the first is that (should you be, as Lord Luxellian says you are, disposed to assist us) yourself or some member of your staff come and see the building, and report thereupon for the satisfaction of parishioners and others.
'The spot is a very remote one: we have no railway within fourteen miles; and the nearest place for putting up at—called a town, though merely a large village—is Castle Boterel, two miles further on; so that it would be most convenient for you to stay at the vicarage—which I am glad to place at your disposal—instead of pushing on to the hotel at Castle Boterel, and coming back again in the morning.
'Any day of the next week that you like to name for the visit will find us quite ready to receive you.—Yours very truly,
CHRISTOPHER SWANCOURT. 2.—MR. HEWBY TO MR. SWANCOURT.
"PERCY PLACE, CHARING CROSS, Feb. 20, 18—.
'DEAR SIR,—Agreeably to your request of the 18th instant, I have arranged to survey and make drawings of the aisle and tower of your parish church, and of the dilapidations which have been suffered to accrue thereto, with a view to its restoration.
'My assistant, Mr. Stephen Smith, will leave London by the early train to-morrow morning for the purpose. Many thanks for your proposal to accommodate him. He will take advantage of your offer, and will probably reach your house at some hour of the evening. You may put

every confidence in him, and may rely upon his discernment in the matter of church architecture.
'Trusting that the plans for the restoration, which I shall prepare from the details of his survey, will prove satisfactory to yourself and Lord Luxellian, I am, dear sir, yours faithfully,
WALTER HEWBY.'

Chapter 3

'Melodious birds sing madrigals'

That first repast in Endelstow Vicarage was a very agreeable one to young Stephen Smith. The table was spread, as Elfride had suggested to her father, with the materials for the heterogeneous meal called high tea—a class of refection welcome to all when away from men and towns, and particularly attractive to youthful palates. The table was prettily decked with winter flowers and leaves, amid which the eye was greeted by chops, chicken, pie, &c., and two huge pasties overhanging the sides of the dish with a cheerful aspect of abundance.

At the end, towards the fireplace, appeared the tea-service, of old-fashioned Worcester porcelain, and behind this arose the slight form of Elfride, attempting to add matronly dignity to the movement of pouring out tea, and to have a weighty and concerned look in matters of marmalade, honey, and clotted cream. Having made her own meal before he arrived, she found to her embarrassment that there was nothing left for her to do but talk when not assisting him. She asked him if he would excuse her finishing a letter she had been writing at a side-table, and, after sitting down to it, tingled with a sense of being grossly rude. However, seeing that he noticed nothing personally wrong in her, and that he too was embarrassed when she attentively watched his cup to refill it, Elfride became better at ease; and when furthermore he accidentally kicked the leg of the table, and then nearly upset his tea-cup, just as schoolboys did, she felt herself mistress of the situation, and could talk very well. In a few minutes ingenuousness and a common term of years obliterated all recollection that they were strangers just met. Stephen began to wax eloquent on extremely slight experiences connected with his professional pursuits; and she, having no experiences to fall back upon, recounted with much animation stories that had been related to her by her father, which would have astonished him had he heard with what fidelity of action and tone they were rendered. Upon the whole, a very interesting picture of Sweet-and-Twenty was on view that evening in Mr. Swancourt's house.

Ultimately Stephen had to go upstairs and talk loud to the vicar, receiving from him between his puffs a great many apologies for calling him so unceremoniously to a stranger's bedroom. 'But,' continued Mr. Swancourt, 'I felt that I wanted to say a few words to you before the morning, on the business of your visit. One's patience gets exhausted by staying a prisoner in bed all day through a sudden freak of one's enemy—new to me, though—for I have known very little of gout as yet. However, he's gone to my other toe in a very mild manner, and I expect

he'll slink off altogether by the morning. I hope you have been well attended to downstairs?'
'Perfectly. And though it is unfortunate, and I am sorry to see you laid up, I beg you will not take the slightest notice of my being in the house the while.'
'I will not. But I shall be down to-morrow. My daughter is an excellent doctor. A dose or two of her mild mixtures will fetch me round quicker than all the drug stuff in the world. Well, now about the church business. Take a seat, do. We can't afford to stand upon ceremony in these parts as you see, and for this reason, that a civilized human being seldom stays long with us; and so we cannot waste time in approaching him, or he will be gone before we have had the pleasure of close acquaintance. This tower of ours is, as you will notice, entirely gone beyond the possibility of restoration; but the church itself is well enough. You should see some of the churches in this county. Floors rotten: ivy lining the walls.'
'Dear me!'
'Oh, that's nothing. The congregation of a neighbour of mine, whenever a storm of rain comes on during service, open their umbrellas and hold them up till the dripping ceases from the roof. Now, if you will kindly bring me those papers and letters you see lying on the table, I will show you how far we have got.'
Stephen crossed the room to fetch them, and the vicar seemed to notice more particularly the slim figure of his visitor.
'I suppose you are quite competent?' he said.
'Quite,' said the young man, colouring slightly.
'You are very young, I fancy—I should say you are not more than nineteen?'
I am nearly twenty-one.'
'Exactly half my age; I am forty-two.'
'By the way,' said Mr. Swancourt, after some conversation, 'you said your whole name was Stephen Fitzmaurice, and that your grandfather came originally from Caxbury. Since I have been speaking, it has occurred to me that I know something of you. You belong to a well-known ancient county family—not ordinary Smiths in the least.'
'I don't think we have any of their blood in our veins.'
'Nonsense! you must. Hand me the "Landed Gentry." Now, let me see. There, Stephen Fitzmaurice Smith—he lies in St. Mary's Church, doesn't he? Well, out of that family Sprang the Leaseworthy Smiths, and collaterally came General Sir Stephen Fitzmaurice Smith of Caxbury——'
'Yes; I have seen his monument there,' shouted Stephen. 'But there is no connection between his family and mine: there cannot be.'
'There is none, possibly, to your knowledge. But look at this, my dear sir,' said the vicar, striking his fist upon the bedpost for emphasis. 'Here are you, Stephen Fitzmaurice Smith, living in London, but springing

from Caxbury. Here in this book is a genealogical tree of the Stephen Fitzmaurice Smiths of Caxbury Manor. You may be only a family of professional men now—I am not inquisitive: I don't ask questions of that kind; it is not in me to do so—but it is as plain as the nose in your face that there's your origin! And, Mr. Smith, I congratulate you upon your blood; blue blood, sir; and, upon my life, a very desirable colour, as the world goes.'

'I wish you could congratulate me upon some more tangible quality,' said the younger man, sadly no less than modestly.

'Nonsense! that will come with time. You are young: all your life is before you. Now look—see how far back in the mists of antiquity my own family of Swancourt have a root. Here, you see,' he continued, turning to the page, 'is Geoffrey, the one among my ancestors who lost a barony because he would cut his joke. Ah, it's the sort of us! But the story is too long to tell now. Ay, I'm a poor man—a poor gentleman, in fact: those I would be friends with, won't be friends with me; those who are willing to be friends with me, I am above being friends with. Beyond dining with a neighbouring incumbent or two, and an occasional chat—sometimes dinner—with Lord Luxellian, a connection of mine, I am in absolute solitude—absolute.'

'You have your studies, your books, and your—daughter.'

'Oh yes, yes; and I don't complain of poverty. Canto coram latrone. Well, Mr. Smith, don't let me detain you any longer in a sick room. Ha! that reminds me of a story I once heard in my younger days.' Here the vicar began a series of small private laughs, and Stephen looked inquiry. 'Oh, no, no! it is too bad—too bad to tell!' continued Mr. Swancourt in undertones of grim mirth. 'Well, go downstairs; my daughter must do the best she can with you this evening. Ask her to sing to you—she plays and sings very nicely. Good-night; I feel as if I had known you for five or six years. I'll ring for somebody to show you down.'

'Never mind,' said Stephen, 'I can find the way.' And he went downstairs, thinking of the delightful freedom of manner in the remoter counties in comparison with the reserve of London.

'I forgot to tell you that my father was rather deaf,' said Elfride anxiously, when Stephen entered the little drawing-room.

'Never mind; I know all about it, and we are great friends,' the man of business replied enthusiastically. 'And, Miss Swancourt, will you kindly sing to me?'

To Miss Swancourt this request seemed, what in fact it was, exceptionally point-blank; though she guessed that her father had some hand in framing it, knowing, rather to her cost, of his unceremonious way of utilizing her for the benefit of dull sojourners. At the same time, as Mr. Smith's manner was too frank to provoke criticism, and his age too little to inspire fear, she was ready—not to say pleased—to accede. Selecting from the canterbury some old family ditties, that in years gone

by had been played and sung by her mother, Elfride sat down to the pianoforte, and began, ''Twas on the evening of a winter's day,' in a pretty contralto voice.
'Do you like that old thing, Mr. Smith?' she said at the end.
'Yes, I do much,' said Stephen—words he would have uttered, and sincerely, to anything on earth, from glee to requiem, that she might have chosen.
'You shall have a little one by De Leyre, that was given me by a young French lady who was staying at Endelstow House:
'"Je l'ai plante, je l'ai vu naitre,

Ce beau rosier ou les oiseaux," &c.;

and then I shall want to give you my own favourite for the very last, Shelley's "When the lamp is shattered," as set to music by my poor mother. I so much like singing to anybody who REALLY cares to hear me.'
Every woman who makes a permanent impression on a man is usually recalled to his mind's eye as she appeared in one particular scene, which seems ordained to be her special form of manifestation throughout the pages of his memory. As the patron Saint has her attitude and accessories in mediaeval illumination, so the sweetheart may be said to have hers upon the table of her true Love's fancy, without which she is rarely introduced there except by effort; and this though she may, on further acquaintance, have been observed in many other phases which one would imagine to be far more appropriate to love's young dream. Miss Elfride's image chose the form in which she was beheld during these minutes of singing, for her permanent attitude of visitation to Stephen's eyes during his sleeping and waking hours in after days. The profile is seen of a young woman in a pale gray silk dress with trimmings of swan's-down, and opening up from a point in front, like a waistcoat without a shirt; the cool colour contrasting admirably with the warm bloom of her neck and face. The furthermost candle on the piano comes immediately in a line with her head, and half invisible itself, forms the accidentally frizzled hair into a nebulous haze of light, surrounding her crown like an aureola. Her hands are in their place on the keys, her lips parted, and trilling forth, in a tender diminuendo, the closing words of the sad apostrophe:
'O Love, who bewailest

The frailty of all things here,

Why choose you the frailest

For your cradle, your home, and your bier!'

Her head is forward a little, and her eyes directed keenly upward to the top of the page of music confronting her. Then comes a rapid look into Stephen's face, and a still more rapid look back again to her business, her face having dropped its sadness, and acquired a certain expression of mischievous archness the while; which lingered there for some time, but was never developed into a positive smile of flirtation.

Stephen suddenly shifted his position from her right hand to her left, where there was just room enough for a small ottoman to stand between the piano and the corner of the room. Into this nook he squeezed himself, and gazed wistfully up into Elfride's face. So long and so earnestly gazed he, that her cheek deepened to a more and more crimson tint as each line was added to her song. Concluding, and pausing motionless after the last word for a minute or two, she ventured to look at him again. His features wore an expression of unutterable heaviness.

'You don't hear many songs, do you, Mr. Smith, to take so much notice of these of mine?'

'Perhaps it was the means and vehicle of the song that I was noticing: I mean yourself,' he answered gently.

'Now, Mr. Smith!'

'It is perfectly true; I don't hear much singing. You mistake what I am, I fancy. Because I come as a stranger to a secluded spot, you think I must needs come from a life of bustle, and know the latest movements of the day. But I don't. My life is as quiet as yours, and more solitary; solitary as death.'

'The death which comes from a plethora of life? But seriously, I can quite see that you are not the least what I thought you would be before I saw you. You are not critical, or experienced, or—much to mind. That's why I don't mind singing airs to you that I only half know.' Finding that by this confession she had vexed him in a way she did not intend, she added naively, 'I mean, Mr. Smith, that you are better, not worse, for being only young and not very experienced. You don't think my life here so very tame and dull, I know.'

'I do not, indeed,' he said with fervour. 'It must be delightfully poetical, and sparkling, and fresh, and——'

'There you go, Mr. Smith! Well, men of another kind, when I get them to be honest enough to own the truth, think just the reverse: that my life must be a dreadful bore in its normal state, though pleasant for the exceptional few days they pass here.'

'I could live here always!' he said, and with such a tone and look of unconscious revelation that Elfride was startled to find that her harmonies had fired a small Troy, in the shape of Stephen's heart. She said quickly:

'But you can't live here always.'
'Oh no.' And he drew himself in with the sensitiveness of a snail. Elfride's emotions were sudden as his in kindling, but the least of woman's lesser infirmities—love of admiration—caused an inflammable disposition on his part, so exactly similar to her own, to appear as meritorious in him as modesty made her own seem culpable in her.

Chapter 4

'Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap.'

For reasons of his own, Stephen Smith was stirring a short time after dawn the next morning. From the window of his room he could see, first, two bold escarpments sloping down together like the letter V. Towards the bottom, like liquid in a funnel, appeared the sea, gray and small. On the brow of one hill, of rather greater altitude than its neighbour, stood the church which was to be the scene of his operations. The lonely edifice was black and bare, cutting up into the sky from the very tip of the hill. It had a square mouldering tower, owning neither battlement nor pinnacle, and seemed a monolithic termination, of one substance with the ridge, rather than a structure raised thereon. Round the church ran a low wall; over-topping the wall in general level was the graveyard; not as a graveyard usually is, a fragment of landscape with its due variety of chiaro-oscuro, but a mere profile against the sky, serrated with the outlines of graves and a very few memorial stones. Not a tree could exist up there: nothing but the monotonous gray-green grass.

Five minutes after this casual survey was made his bedroom was empty, and its occupant had vanished quietly from the house.

At the end of two hours he was again in the room, looking warm and glowing. He now pursued the artistic details of dressing, which on his first rising had been entirely omitted. And a very blooming boy he looked, after that mysterious morning scamper. His mouth was a triumph of its class. It was the cleanly-cut, piquantly pursed-up mouth of William Pitt, as represented in the well or little known bust by Nollekens—a mouth which is in itself a young man's fortune, if properly exercised. His round chin, where its upper part turned inward, still continued its perfect and full curve, seeming to press in to a point the bottom of his nether lip at their place of junction.

Once he murmured the name of Elfride. Ah, there she was! On the lawn in a plain dress, without hat or bonnet, running with a boy's velocity, superadded to a girl's lightness, after a tame rabbit she was endeavouring to capture, her strategic intonations of coaxing words alternating with desperate rushes so much out of keeping with them, that the hollowness of such expressions was but too evident to her pet, who darted and dodged in carefully timed counterpart.

The scene down there was altogether different from that of the hills. A thicket of shrubs and trees enclosed the favoured spot from the wilderness without; even at this time of the year the grass was luxuriant there. No wind blew inside the protecting belt of evergreens, wasting its

force upon the higher and stronger trees forming the outer margin of the grove.
Then he heard a heavy person shuffling about in slippers, and calling 'Mr. Smith!' Smith proceeded to the study, and found Mr. Swancourt. The young man expressed his gladness to see his host downstairs.
'Oh yes; I knew I should soon be right again. I have not made the acquaintance of gout for more than two years, and it generally goes off the second night. Well, where have you been this morning? I saw you come in just now, I think!'
'Yes; I have been for a walk.'
'Start early?'
'Yes.'
'Very early, I think?'
'Yes, it was rather early.'
'Which way did you go? To the sea, I suppose. Everybody goes seaward.'
'No; I followed up the river as far as the park wall.'
'You are different from your kind. Well, I suppose such a wild place is a novelty, and so tempted you out of bed?'
'Not altogether a novelty. I like it.'
The youth seemed averse to explanation.
'You must, you must; to go cock-watching the morning after a journey of fourteen or sixteen hours. But there's no accounting for tastes, and I am glad to see that yours are no meaner. After breakfast, but not before, I shall be good for a ten miles' walk, Master Smith.'
Certainly there seemed nothing exaggerated in that assertion. Mr. Swancourt by daylight showed himself to be a man who, in common with the other two people under his roof, had really strong claims to be considered handsome,—handsome, that is, in the sense in which the moon is bright: the ravines and valleys which, on a close inspection, are seen to diversify its surface being left out of the argument. His face was of a tint that never deepened upon his cheeks nor lightened upon his forehead, but remained uniform throughout; the usual neutral salmon-colour of a man who feeds well—not to say too well—and does not think hard; every pore being in visible working order. His tout ensemble was that of a highly improved class of farmer, dressed up in the wrong clothes; that of a firm-standing perpendicular man, whose fall would have been backwards in direction if he had ever lost his balance.
The vicar's background was at present what a vicar's background should be, his study. Here the consistency ends. All along the chimneypiece were ranged bottles of horse, pig, and cow medicines, and against the wall was a high table, made up of the fragments of an old oak Iychgate. Upon this stood stuffed specimens of owls, divers, and gulls, and over them bunches of wheat and barley ears, labelled with the date of the year that produced them. Some cases and shelves, more or less laden with books, the prominent titles of which were Dr. Brown's 'Notes on

the Romans,' Dr. Smith's 'Notes on the Corinthians,' and Dr. Robinson's 'Notes on the Galatians, Ephesians, and Philippians,' just saved the character of the place, in spite of a girl's doll's-house standing above them, a marine aquarium in the window, and Elfride's hat hanging on its corner.

'Business, business!' said Mr. Swancourt after breakfast. He began to find it necessary to act the part of a fly-wheel towards the somewhat irregular forces of his visitor.

They prepared to go to the church; the vicar, on second thoughts, mounting his coal-black mare to avoid exerting his foot too much at starting. Stephen said he should want a man to assist him. 'Worm!' the vicar shouted.

A minute or two after a voice was heard round the corner of the building, mumbling, 'Ah, I used to be strong enough, but 'tis altered now! Well, there, I'm as independent as one here and there, even if they do write 'squire after their names.'

'What's the matter?' said the vicar, as William Worm appeared; when the remarks were repeated to him.

'Worm says some very true things sometimes,' Mr. Swancourt said, turning to Stephen. 'Now, as regards that word "esquire." Why, Mr. Smith, that word "esquire" is gone to the dogs,—used on the letters of every jackanapes who has a black coat. Anything else, Worm?'

'Ay, the folk have begun frying again!'

'Dear me! I'm sorry to hear that.'

'Yes,' Worm said groaningly to Stephen, 'I've got such a noise in my head that there's no living night nor day. 'Tis just for all the world like people frying fish: fry, fry, fry, all day long in my poor head, till I don't know whe'r I'm here or yonder. There, God A'mighty will find it out sooner or later, I hope, and relieve me.'

'Now, my deafness,' said Mr. Swancourt impressively, 'is a dead silence; but William Worm's is that of people frying fish in his head. Very remarkable, isn't it?'

'I can hear the frying-pan a-fizzing as naterel as life,' said Worm corroboratively.

'Yes, it is remarkable,' said Mr. Smith.

'Very peculiar, very peculiar,' echoed the vicar; and they all then followed the path up the hill, bounded on each side by a little stone wall, from which gleamed fragments of quartz and blood-red marbles, apparently of inestimable value, in their setting of brown alluvium. Stephen walked with the dignity of a man close to the horse's head, Worm stumbled along a stone's throw in the rear, and Elfride was nowhere in particular, yet everywhere; sometimes in front, sometimes behind, sometimes at the sides, hovering about the procession like a butterfly; not definitely engaged in travelling, yet somehow chiming in at points with the general progress.

The vicar explained things as he went on: 'The fact is, Mr. Smith, I didn't want this bother of church restoration at all, but it was necessary to do something in self-defence, on account of those d——dissenters: I use the word in its scriptural meaning, of course, not as an expletive.'
'How very odd!' said Stephen, with the concern demanded of serious friendliness.
'Odd? That's nothing to how it is in the parish of Twinkley. Both the churchwardens are——; there, I won't say what they are; and the clerk and the sexton as well.'
'How very strange!' said Stephen.
'Strange? My dear sir, that's nothing to how it is in the parish of Sinnerton. However, as to our own parish, I hope we shall make some progress soon.'
'You must trust to circumstances.'
'There are no circumstances to trust to. We may as well trust in Providence if we trust at all. But here we are. A wild place, isn't it? But I like it on such days as these.'
The churchyard was entered on this side by a stone stile, over which having clambered, you remained still on the wild hill, the within not being so divided from the without as to obliterate the sense of open freedom. A delightful place to be buried in, postulating that delight can accompany a man to his tomb under any circumstances. There was nothing horrible in this churchyard, in the shape of tight mounds bonded with sticks, which shout imprisonment in the ears rather than whisper rest; or trim garden-flowers, which only raise images of people in new black crape and white handkerchiefs coming to tend them; or wheel-marks, which remind us of hearses and mourning coaches; or cypress-bushes, which make a parade of sorrow; or coffin-boards and bones lying behind trees, showing that we are only leaseholders of our graves. No; nothing but long, wild, untutored grass, diversifying the forms of the mounds it covered,—themselves irregularly shaped, with no eye to effect; the impressive presence of the old mountain that all this was a part of being nowhere excluded by disguising art. Outside were similar slopes and similar grass; and then the serene impassive sea, visible to a width of half the horizon, and meeting the eye with the effect of a vast concave, like the interior of a blue vessel. Detached rocks stood upright afar, a collar of foam girding their bases, and repeating in its whiteness the plumage of a countless multitude of gulls that restlessly hovered about.
'Now, Worm!' said Mr. Swancourt sharply; and Worm started into an attitude of attention at once to receive orders. Stephen and himself were then left in possession, and the work went on till early in the afternoon, when dinner was announced by Unity of the vicarage kitchen running up the hill without a bonnet.

Elfride did not make her appearance inside the building till late in the afternoon, and came then by special invitation from Stephen during dinner. She looked so intensely LIVING and full of movement as she came into the old silent place, that young Smith's world began to be lit by 'the purple light' in all its definiteness. Worm was got rid of by sending him to measure the height of the tower.

What could she do but come close—so close that a minute arc of her skirt touched his foot—and asked him how he was getting on with his sketches, and set herself to learn the principles of practical mensuration as applied to irregular buildings? Then she must ascend the pulpit to re-imagine for the hundredth time how it would seem to be a preacher. Presently she leant over the front of the pulpit.

'Don't you tell papa, will you, Mr. Smith, if I tell you something?' she said with a sudden impulse to make a confidence.

'Oh no, that I won't,' said he, staring up.

'Well, I write papa's sermons for him very often, and he preaches them better than he does his own; and then afterwards he talks to people and to me about what he said in his sermon to-day, and forgets that I wrote it for him. Isn't it absurd?'

'How clever you must be!' said Stephen. 'I couldn't write a sermon for the world.'

'Oh, it's easy enough,' she said, descending from the pulpit and coming close to him to explain more vividly. 'You do it like this. Did you ever play a game of forfeits called "When is it? where is it? what is it?"'

'No, never.'

'Ah, that's a pity, because writing a sermon is very much like playing that game. You take the text. You think, why is it? what is it? and so on. You put that down under "Generally." Then you proceed to the First, Secondly, and Thirdly. Papa won't have Fourthlys—says they are all my eye. Then you have a final Collectively, several pages of this being put in great black brackets, writing opposite, "LEAVE THIS OUT IF THE FARMERS ARE FALLING ASLEEP." Then comes your In Conclusion, then A Few Words And I Have Done. Well, all this time you have put on the back of each page, "KEEP YOUR VOICE DOWN"—I mean,' she added, correcting herself, 'that's how I do in papa's sermon-book, because otherwise he gets louder and louder, till at last he shouts like a farmer up a-field. Oh, papa is so funny in some things!'

Then, after this childish burst of confidence, she was frightened, as if warned by womanly instinct, which for the moment her ardour had outrun, that she had been too forward to a comparative stranger. Elfride saw her father then, and went away into the wind, being caught by a gust as she ascended the churchyard slope, in which gust she had the motions, without the motives, of a hoiden; the grace, without the self-consciousness, of a pirouetter. She conversed for a minute or two with her father, and proceeded homeward, Mr. Swancourt coming on to

the church to Stephen. The wind had freshened his warm complexion as it freshens the glow of a brand. He was in a mood of jollity, and watched Elfride down the hill with a smile.
'You little flyaway! you look wild enough now,' he said, and turned to Stephen. 'But she's not a wild child at all, Mr. Smith. As steady as you; and that you are steady I see from your diligence here.'
'I think Miss Swancourt very clever,' Stephen observed.
'Yes, she is; certainly, she is,' said papa, turning his voice as much as possible to the neutral tone of disinterested criticism. 'Now, Smith, I'll tell you something; but she mustn't know it for the world—not for the world, mind, for she insists upon keeping it a dead secret. Why, SHE WRITES MY SERMONS FOR ME OFTEN, and a very good job she makes of them!'
'She can do anything.'
'She can do that. The little rascal has the very trick of the trade. But, mind you, Smith, not a word about it to her, not a single word!'
'Not a word,' said Smith.
'Look there,' said Mr. Swancourt. 'What do you think of my roofing?' He pointed with his walking-stick at the chancel roof,
'Did you do that, sir?'
'Yes, I worked in shirt-sleeves all the time that was going on. I pulled down the old rafters, fixed the new ones, put on the battens, slated the roof, all with my own hands, Worm being my assistant. We worked like slaves, didn't we, Worm?'
'Ay, sure, we did; harder than some here and there—hee, hee!' said William Worm, cropping up from somewhere. 'Like slaves, 'a b'lieve—hee, hee! And weren't ye foaming mad, sir, when the nails wouldn't go straight? Mighty I! There, 'tisn't so bad to cuss and keep it in as to cuss and let it out, is it, sir?'
'Well—why?'
'Because you, sir, when ye were a-putting on the roof, only used to cuss in your mind, which is, I suppose, no harm at all.'
'I don't think you know what goes on in my mind, Worm.'
'Oh, doan't I, sir—hee, hee! Maybe I'm but a poor wambling thing, sir, and can't read much; but I can spell as well as some here and there. Doan't ye mind, sir, that blustrous night when ye asked me to hold the candle to ye in yer workshop, when you were making a new chair for the chancel?'
'Yes; what of that?'
'I stood with the candle, and you said you liked company, if 'twas only a dog or cat—maning me; and the chair wouldn't do nohow.'
'Ah, I remember.'
'No; the chair wouldn't do nohow. 'A was very well to look at; but, Lord! ——'
'Worm, how often have I corrected you for irreverent speaking?'

'—'A was very well to look at, but you couldn't sit in the chair nohow. 'Twas all a-twist wi' the chair, like the letter Z, directly you sat down upon the chair. "Get up, Worm," says you, when you seed the chair go all a-sway wi' me. Up you took the chair, and flung en like fire and brimstone to t'other end of your shop—all in a passion. "Damn the chair!" says I. "Just what I was thinking," says you, sir. "I could see it in your face, sir," says I, "and I hope you and God will forgi'e me for saying what you wouldn't." To save your life you couldn't help laughing, sir, at a poor wambler reading your thoughts so plain. Ay, I'm as wise as one here and there.'

'I thought you had better have a practical man to go over the church and tower with you,' Mr. Swancourt said to Stephen the following morning, 'so I got Lord Luxellian's permission to send for a man when you came. I told him to be there at ten o'clock. He's a very intelligent man, and he will tell you all you want to know about the state of the walls. His name is John Smith.'

Elfride did not like to be seen again at the church with Stephen. 'I will watch here for your appearance at the top of the tower,' she said laughingly. 'I shall see your figure against the sky.'

'And when I am up there I'll wave my handkerchief to you, Miss Swancourt,' said Stephen. 'In twelve minutes from this present moment,' he added, looking at his watch, 'I'll be at the summit and look out for you.'

She went round to the corner of the shrubbery, whence she could watch him down the slope leading to the foot of the hill on which the church stood. There she saw waiting for him a white spot—a mason in his working clothes. Stephen met this man and stopped.

To her surprise, instead of their moving on to the churchyard, they both leisurely sat down upon a stone close by their meeting-place, and remained as if in deep conversation. Elfride looked at the time; nine of the twelve minutes had passed, and Stephen showed no signs of moving. More minutes passed—she grew cold with waiting, and shivered. It was not till the end of a quarter of an hour that they began to slowly wend up the hill at a snail's pace.

'Rude and unmannerly!' she said to herself, colouring with pique. 'Anybody would think he was in love with that horrid mason instead of with——'

The sentence remained unspoken, though not unthought.

She returned to the porch.

'Is the man you sent for a lazy, sit-still, do-nothing kind of man?' she inquired of her father.

'No,' he said surprised; 'quite the reverse. He is Lord Luxellian's master-mason, John Smith.'

'Oh,' said Elfride indifferently, and returned towards her bleak station, and waited and shivered again. It was a trifle, after all—a childish thing

—looking out from a tower and waving a handkerchief. But her new friend had promised, and why should he tease her so? The effect of a blow is as proportionate to the texture of the object struck as to its own momentum; and she had such a superlative capacity for being wounded that little hits struck her hard.

It was not till the end of half an hour that two figures were seen above the parapet of the dreary old pile, motionless as bitterns on a ruined mosque. Even then Stephen was not true enough to perform what he was so courteous to promise, and he vanished without making a sign.

He returned at midday. Elfride looked vexed when unconscious that his eyes were upon her; when conscious, severe. However, her attitude of coldness had long outlived the coldness itself, and she could no longer utter feigned words of indifference.

'Ah, you weren't kind to keep me waiting in the cold, and break your promise,' she said at last reproachfully, in tones too low for her father's powers of hearing.

'Forgive, forgive me!' said Stephen with dismay. 'I had forgotten—quite forgotten! Something prevented my remembering.'

'Any further explanation?' said Miss Capricious, pouting.

He was silent for a few minutes, and looked askance.

'None,' he said, with the accent of one who concealed a sin.

Chapter 5

'Bosom'd high in tufted trees.'

It was breakfast time.
As seen from the vicarage dining-room, which took a warm tone of light from the fire, the weather and scene outside seemed to have stereotyped themselves in unrelieved shades of gray. The long-armed trees and shrubs of juniper, cedar, and pine varieties, were grayish black; those of the broad-leaved sort, together with the herbage, were grayish-green; the eternal hills and tower behind them were grayish-brown; the sky, dropping behind all, gray of the purest melancholy.
Yet in spite of this sombre artistic effect, the morning was not one which tended to lower the spirits. It was even cheering. For it did not rain, nor was rain likely to fall for many days to come.
Elfride had turned from the table towards the fire and was idly elevating a hand-screen before her face, when she heard the click of a little gate outside.
'Ah, here's the postman!' she said, as a shuffling, active man came through an opening in the shrubbery and across the lawn. She vanished, and met him in the porch, afterwards coming in with her hands behind her back.
'How many are there? Three for papa, one for Mr. Smith, none for Miss Swancourt. And, papa, look here, one of yours is from—whom do you think?—Lord Luxellian. And it has something HARD in it—a lump of something. I've been feeling it through the envelope, and can't think what it is.'
'What does Luxellian write for, I wonder?' Mr. Swancourt had said simultaneously with her words. He handed Stephen his letter, and took his own, putting on his countenance a higher class of look than was customary, as became a poor gentleman who was going to read a letter from a peer.
Stephen read his missive with a countenance quite the reverse of the vicar's.
'PERCY PLACE, Thursday Evening.

'DEAR SMITH,—Old H. is in a towering rage with you for being so long about the church sketches. Swears you are more trouble than you are worth. He says I am to write and say you are to stay no longer on any consideration—that he would have done it all in three hours very easily. I told him that you were not like an experienced hand, which he seemed to forget, but it did not make much difference. However, between you and me privately, if I were you I would not alarm myself for a day or so, if I were not inclined to return. I would make out

the week and finish my spree. He will blow up just as much if you appear here on Saturday as if you keep away till Monday morning.—Yours very truly,
'SIMPKINS JENKINS.
'Dear me—very awkward!' said Stephen, rather en l'air, and confused with the kind of confusion that assails an understrapper when he has been enlarged by accident to the dimensions of a superior, and is somewhat rudely pared down to his original size.
'What is awkward?' said Miss Swancourt.
Smith by this time recovered his equanimity, and with it the professional dignity of an experienced architect.
'Important business demands my immediate presence in London, I regret to say,' he replied.
'What! Must you go at once?' said Mr. Swancourt, looking over the edge of his letter. 'Important business? A young fellow like you to have important business!'
'The truth is,' said Stephen blushing, and rather ashamed of having pretended even so slightly to a consequence which did not belong to him,—'the truth is, Mr. Hewby has sent to say I am to come home; and I must obey him.'
'I see; I see. It is politic to do so, you mean. Now I can see more than you think. You are to be his partner. I booked you for that directly I read his letter to me the other day, and the way he spoke of you. He thinks a great deal of you, Mr. Smith, or he wouldn't be so anxious for your return.'
Unpleasant to Stephen such remarks as these could not sound; to have the expectancy of partnership with one of the largest-practising architects in London thrust upon him was cheering, however untenable he felt the idea to be. He saw that, whatever Mr. Hewby might think, Mr. Swancourt certainly thought much of him to entertain such an idea on such slender ground as to be absolutely no ground at all. And then, unaccountably, his speaking face exhibited a cloud of sadness, which a reflection on the remoteness of any such contingency could hardly have sufficed to cause.
Elfride was struck with that look of his; even Mr. Swancourt noticed it.
'Well,' he said cheerfully, 'never mind that now. You must come again on your own account; not on business. Come to see me as a visitor, you know—say, in your holidays—all you town men have holidays like schoolboys. When are they?'
'In August, I believe.'
'Very well; come in August; and then you need not hurry away so. I am glad to get somebody decent to talk to, or at, in this outlandish ultima Thule. But, by the bye, I have something to say—you won't go to-day?'
'No; I need not,' said Stephen hesitatingly. 'I am not obliged to get back before Monday morning.'