

CHAPTER V

A STRANGE MEETING

"Poor little Phyllis!" muttered Carruthers, as he walked on with quickened step, while the sun sank slowly in the west and gave every promise of a splendid but stormy sunset. "Poor girl, poor girl! And that was to be the end of our early love!... Perhaps better so. I could not have endured to see her develop into a coarse, vulgar woman, united to some drunken drudge of a husband, with a lot of untidy children at her heels.... Well, well, rest her soul, poor girl! But to say that she died through pining for love of me is, at the least, doubtful.... Dying for love only occurs in story books... I should like, however, to know the truth.... It was probably consumption brought about by a neglected cold; but as to witchcraft having anything to do with it, that, I think, is too absurd to believe.... It is surprising how ready the rustic mind is to put everything down to the supernatural that baffles its understanding."

Thus Carruthers mused as he strode on in the now fast-deepening twilight, stopping at intervals as he watched the great orb of day descend below the horizon in flaming colours of gold and purple! "How grand! How gorgeous a spectacle" he muttered, as he stood rooted to the spot with his greedy eyes fixed on the afterglow. What noble thoughts did it call forth? What sublime, unspeakable feelings stirred within him? Soon the radiant colours faded into an uniform grey, enveloping the brilliant scene in hues of sombre sadness.

Soft memories of Phyllis would arise in his heart, and the scene before him appeared to harmonise with his melancholy feelings.

But being a robust, healthy man, he shook off this unusual mood, comforting himself with the following sophistry: "Bah! she was but a child! We were both children... It was, after all only boy and girl play... Had she lived what could she have been to me? Besides, I had forgotten her."

Carruthers had been walking for some time now, and the darkness had gradually risen from the earth, like a series of gauze veils, and only a few stars were visible. The sound of a distant church bell reminded him it was Sunday, and, a few miles further on, the lights from a church window stood out from the surrounding shadows. This, he thought, could be no other than the very ancient church of St. Cuthbert, that had been built on the ruins of some heathen temple in the early dawn of Christianity. Carruthers knew it well, and indeed, had often strolled through the churchyard with Phyllis in his boyhood, trying to decipher the epitaphs of the old, moss-covered tombstones. He remembered a gigantic yew tree with its gnarled, widely-spreading, serpent-like roots that tradition said was standing before the present church was built. Its age was even estimated to be sixteen hundred years. Would it be there now? And the old vicar whom he had known, would he still be in the land of the living?

A mist was now rising which, together with the deepening twilight, obscured his path, but he groped his way along until his foot encountered an obstacle. Stretching forth his hand he discovered that it was the low stone wall which enclosed the churchyard. He knew now that he was only about a mile distant from Abbotswood. The church bell had stopped, but the light through the stained-glass windows reached him through the trees. His walk had been a long one, and he felt that he needed a rest. He resolved to enter the church, and vaulted over the low wall,

and, in doing so, almost fell into an open grave on the other side, but he dexterously avoided this unpleasant experience, and entered the edifice by a side door. The congregation, he observed, was exceedingly meagre. He sat down in one of the seats near the door, and looked around. Yes, there was the old man whom he had last seen hale hearty, but who was now old and decrepit. The vicar gave out the hymn which precedes the sermon. A hymn-book lay before him, and he was busying himself in finding the one to be sung, when, looking up for an instant, he perceived that he was not alone in the pew. A lady, dressed in deep mourning, apparently a widow, tall, graceful, and youthful, had entered unseen, while he was turning over the pages of the book. Seeing that she was without one he offered to share his with her; and took the opportunity to scan her features, which struck him as romantically beautiful, though her skin was of an almost ghostly pallor, from which her rather deeply set black and flashing eyes stood out in the boldest relief. Her hair was of a purple blackness; her lips full, brilliantly red and prominent; the shape, however, was that of a perfect Cupid's bow. She had taken off one glove from the hand with which she held the hymn-book, and the Captain noticed, with keen eyes, that it was small and delicately shaped, but that the fingers were rather too pointed at the tips, and the nails, although filbert-shaped, grew over them and assumed the appearance of claws. This peculiarity he had before noticed in consumptive people; but not to so great a degree. He rapidly summed up the lady to be a young widow still mourning for the death of her dearly-loved husband, and who was, partly through grief, on the verge of consumption.

The warm sympathy of the soldier was aroused for her. He felt drawn to her by a mysterious power. It was a compound feeling, partly love and partly sympathy; but it was, at least, a strong feeling of interest, in addition to the pity and admiration which she had aroused.

So young and so unfortunate and unhappy! he said to himself as his glance rested oftener on her pale, romantic beauty than on the printed page.

He noticed that her voice did not join in the singing, and when the hymn was finished she mutely thanked him with a smile, and slight inclination of her head, raising her deep, flashing eyes momentarily at the same time.

What deep magnetic power was there in that brief, almost furtive glance, that caused his heart and nerves to thrill and throb as neither had ever done before?--It was a mixture of keen delight and keener pain.

He must find out who she was. He would not let her pass away out of his life.

No; he would follow her, if necessary, to the ends of the earth rather than that. As this thought and resolution flashed through brain and heart, the venerable vicar had ascended the pulpit, and soon gave his text, which happened to be from Ezekiel, chapter xxxvii. and part of the twelfth verse: "I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves."

It struck Carruthers as an unusual one, and he wondered what the vicar would make of it in his sermon.

The vicar repeated the strangely weird text, and then he slowly examined the thin congregation. His eye soon alighted on the Lady in Black seated near Carruthers, and at once fixed there in a stony stare. The colour left his face, his eyes appeared to almost start from their sockets, his jaw dropped, and with a wild exclamation, he fell senseless to the bottom of his pulpit. There was an immediate stir amongst the worshippers, and the verger, who, fortunately, was a very tall, powerful man, hurried up the pulpit stairs, and carried the spare, thin form of the vicar down the steps, through the church, into the vestry.

A storm had been gathering its forces since sunset, and now, ripe for destruction, burst in all its fury. Vivid flashes tore the dark, heavy clouds in quick succession, and the detonations of

thunder claps which followed each other at quicker and quicker intervals caused the old church to shake to its foundations, and, indeed, appeared to threaten to bury the congregation, already pale with terror, under its crumbling ruins. They hesitated whether to brave the storm and rush for home or to wait for the fury of the storm to lessen. The lightning did abate, in time, and the people left the church. When Carruthers looked around for his companion, to his utter astonishment, she had disappeared.