

CHAPTER XIII

LITTLE BEEDING AGAIN

BUT though she disappeared Stella Ballantyne was not in flight from men and women. She avoided them because they did not for the moment count in her thoughts, except as possible hindrances. She was not so much running away as running to the place of her desires. She yielded to an impulse with which they had nothing whatever to do, an impulse so overmastering that even to the Reptons her precipitancy wore a look of ingratitude. She drove home with Jane Repton as soon as she was released, to the house on Khanballa Hill, and while she was still in the carriage she said :

“ I must go away to-morrow morning.”

She was sitting forward with a tense and eager look upon her face and her hands clenched tightly in her lap.

“ There is no need for that. Make your home with us, Stella, for a little while and hold your head high.”

Jane Repton had talked over this proposal with her husband. Both of them recognised that the acceptance of it would entail on them some little

sacrifice. Prejudice would be difficult. But they had thrust these considerations aside in the loyalty of their friendship and Jane Repton was a little hurt that Stella waved away their invitation without ceremony.

"I can't. I can't," she said irritably. "Don't try to stop me."

Her nerves were quite on edge and she spoke with a greater violence than she knew. Jane Repton tried to persuade her.

"Wouldn't it be wiser for you to face things here, even though it means some effort and pain?"

"I don't know," answered Stella, still in the quick peremptory tone of one who will not be argued with. "I don't care either. I have nothing to do with wisdom just now. I don't want people at all. I want—oh, how I want——" She stopped and then she added vaguely: "Something else," and her voice trailed away into silence. She sat without a word, all tingling impatience, during the rest of that drive and continued so to sit after the carriage had stopped. When Jane Repton descended, and she woke up with a start and looked at the house, it was as though she brought her eyes down from heaven to earth. Once within the house she went straight up to Repton. He had left his wife behind with Stella at the Law Courts and had come home in advance of them. He had not spoken a word to Stella that day, and he had not the time now, for she began immediately in an eager voice and a look of fever in her eyes:

"You won't try to stop me, will you? I must go away to-morrow."

Repton used more tact now than his wife had done. He took the troubled and excited woman's hand and answered her very gently:

"Of course, Stella. You shall go when you like."

"Oh, thank you," she cried, and was freed to remember the debt which she owed to these good friends of hers. "You must think me a brute, Jane! I haven't said a word to you about all your kindness. But—oh, you'll think me ridiculous, when you know"—and she began to laugh and to sob in one breath. Stella Ballantyne had remained so sunk in apathy through all that long trial that her friends were relieved at her outburst of tears. Jane Repton led her upstairs and put her to bed just as if she had been a child.

"There! You can get up for dinner if you like, Stella, or stay where you are. And if you'll tell us what you want to do we'll make the arrangements for you and not ask you a question."

Jane Repton kissed her and left her alone; and it was while Stella was sleeping upstairs that Henry Thresk called at the house and was told that there was no news for him.

"No doubt she will write to you, Mr. Thresk, if she wishes you to know what she is doing. But I should not count upon it if I were you," said Jane Repton, in a sweet voice and with eyes like pebbles. "She did not mention you, I am sorry to say, when the trial was over."

She could not forgive him because of her own share in what she now called his "treachery" towards Stella. She had no more of the logician in her composition than Thresk had of the hero. He had committed under a great stress of emotion and sympathy what the whole experience and method of his life told him was one of the worst of crimes. And now that its object was achieved, and Stella Ballantyne free, he was in the mood to see only the harm which he had done to the majesty of the law; he was uneasy; he was not troubled by the thought that discovery would absolutely ruin him. That indeed did not enter into his thoughts. But he could not but make a picture of himself in the robe of a King's Counsel, claiming sternly the anger of the Law against some other man who should have done just what he had done, no more and no less. And so when Mrs. Repton's door was finally closed upon him, and no message was given to him from the woman he had saved, he was at once human and unheroic enough to visit a little of his resentment upon her. He had not spoken to her at all since the night at Chitipur; he had no knowledge of the stupor and the prostration into which, after her years of misery, she had fallen; he had no insight into the one compelling passion which now had her, body and soul, in its grip. He turned away from the door and went back to the Taj Mahal. A steamer would be starting for Port Said in two days and by that steamer he would travel. That Stella was in the house on the Khamballa Hill he did not doubt, but

since she had no word or thought to spare for him he could not but turn his back and go.

Stella herself got up to dinner, and after it was over she told her friends of the longing which filled her soul.

“All through the trial,” she said shyly, with the shrinking of those who reveal a very secret fancy and are afraid that it will be ridiculed, “in the heat of the court, in the close captivity of my cell, I was conscious of just one real unconquerable passion—to feel the wind blowing against my face upon the Sussex Downs. Can you understand that? Just to see the broad green hills with the white chalk hollows in their sides and the forests marching down to the valleys like the Roman soldiers from Chichester—oh! I was mad for the look and the smell and the sounds of them! It was all that I thought about. I used to close my eyes in the dock and I was away in a second riding through Charlton Forest or over Farm Hill, or looking down to Slindon from Gumber Corner, and over its woods to the sea. And now that I am free”—she clasped her hands and her face grew radiant—“oh, I don’t want to see people.” She reached out a hand to each of her friends. “I don’t call *you* people, you know. But even you—you’ll understand and forgive and not be hurt—I don’t want to see for a little while.”

The beaten look of her took the sting of ingratitude out of her words. She stood between them, her delicate face worn thin, her eyes unnaturally big; she had the strange transparent beauty of people who have been lying for months in a mortal

sickness. Jane Repton's eyes filled with tears and her hand sought for her handkerchief.

"Let's see what can be done," said Repton. "There's a mail-steamer of course, but you won't want to travel by that."

"No."

Repton worked out the sailings from Bombay and the other ports on the western coast of India while Stella leaned over his shoulder.

"Look!" he said. "This is the best way. There's a steamer going to Kurrachee to-morrow, and when you reach Kurrachee you'll just have time to catch a German Lloyd boat which calls at Southampton. You won't be home in thirteen days to be sure, but on the other hand you won't be pestered by curious people."

"Yes, yes," cried Stella eagerly. "I can go to-morrow."

"Very well."

Repton looked at the clock. It was still no more than half-past ten. He saw with what a fever of impatience Stella was consumed.

"I believe I could lay my hand on the local manager of the line to-night and fix your journey up for you."

"You could?" cried Stella. He might have been offering her a crown, so brightly her thanks shone in her eyes.

"I think so."

He got up from the table and stood looking at her, and then away from her with his lips pursed in doubt.

"Yes?" said she.

"I was thinking. Will you travel under another name? I don't suggest it really, only it might save you—annoyance."

Repton's hesitation was misplaced, for Stella Ballantyne's pride was quite beaten to the ground.

"Yes," she said at once. "I should wish to do that;" and both he and his wife understood from that ready answer more completely than they ever had before how near Stella had come to the big blank wall at the end of life. For seven years she had held her head high, never so much as whispering a reproach against her husband, keeping with a perpetual guard the secret of her misery. Pride had been her mainspring; now even that was broken. Repton went out of the house and returned at midnight.

"It's all settled," he said. "You will have a cabin on deck in both steamers. I gave your name in confidence to the manager here and he will take care that everything possible is done for you. There will be very few passengers on the German boat. The season is too early for either the tourists or the people on leave."

Thus Stella Ballantyne crept away from Bombay and in five weeks' time she landed at Southampton. There she resumed her name. She travelled into Sussex and stayed for a few nights at the inn whither Henry Thresk had come years before on his momentous holiday. She had a little money—the trifling income which her parents had left to her upon their death—and she began to look about for

a house. By a piece of good fortune she discovered that the cottage in which she had lived at Little Beeding would be empty in a few months. She took it and before the summer was out she was once more established there. It was on an August afternoon when Stella made her home in it again. She passed along the yellow lane driven deep between high banks of earth, where the roots of great elm-trees cropped out. Every step was familiar to her. The lane with many twists under overarching branches ran down a steep hill and came out into the open by the big house with its pillared portico and its light grey stone and its wonderful garden of lawn and flowers and cedars. A tiny church with a narrow graveyard and strange carefully-trimmed square bushes of yew stood next to the house, and beyond the church the lane dipped to the river and the cottage.

Stella went from room to room. She had furnished the cottage simply and daintily; the walls were bright, her servant-girl had gathered flowers and set them about. Outside the window the sunlight shone on a green garden. She was alone. It was the home-coming she had wished for.

For three or four months she was left alone; and then one afternoon as she came into the cottage after a walk she found a little white card upon the table. It bore the name of Mr. Hazlewood.