CHAPTER XIV

THE HAZLEWOODS

In the quiet country town obvious changes had taken place during the eight years of Stella's absence. They were not changes of importance however, and one sentence can symbolize them all —there was now tarmac upon its roads. But in the cluster of houses a mile away at the end of the deep lane the case was different. Mr. Harold Hazlewood had come to Little Beeding. He now lived in the big house to which the village owed its name and indeed its existence. He lived— and spread consternation amongst the gentry for miles round.

"Lord, how I wish poor Arthur hadn't died!" old John Chubble used to cry. He had hunted the West Sussex hounds for thirty years and the very name of Little Beeding turned his red face purple. "There was a man. But this fellow! And to think he's got that beautiful house! Do you know there's hardly a pheasant on the place. And I've hashed them down out of the sky in the old days there by the dozen. Well, he's got a son in the Coldstream, Dick Hazlewood, who's not so bad. But Harold! Oh, pass me the port!"

Harold indeed had inherited Little Beeding by an accident during the first summer after Stella had gone out to India. Arthur Hazlewood, the owner and Harold's nephew, had been lost with his yacht in a gale of wind off the coast of Portugal. Arthur was a bachelor and thus Harold Hazlewood came quite unexpectedly into the position of a country squire when he was already well on in middle age. He was a widower and a man of a noticeable aspect. At the first glance you knew that he was not as other men; at the second you suspected that he took a pride in his dissimilarity. He was long, rather shambling in his gait, with a mild blue eye and fair thin hair now growing grey. But length was the chief impression left by his physical appearance. His legs, his arms, his face, even his hair, unless his son in the Coldstream happened to be at home at the time, were long.

"Is your father mad?" Mr. Chubble once asked of Dick Hazlewood. The two men had met in the broad street of Great Beeding at midday, and the elder one, bubbling with indignation, had planted himself in front of Dick.

"Mad?" Dick repeated reflectively. "No, I shouldn't go as far as that. Oh no! What has he done now?"

"He has paid out of his own pocket the fines of all the people in Great Beeding who have just been convicted for not having their babies vaccinated."

Dick Hazlewood stared in surprise at his companion's indignant face.

"But of course he'd do that, Mr. Chubble," he answered cheerfully. "He's anti-everything—everything, I mean, which experience has established or prudence could suggest."

"In addition, he wants to sell the navy for old iron and abolish the army."

"Yes," said Dick, nodding his head amicably. "He's like that. He thinks that without an army and a navy we should be less aggressive. I can't deny it."

"I should think not indeed," cried Mr. Chubble. "Are you walking home?"

"Yes."

"Let us walk together;" Mr. Chubble took Dick Hazlewood by the arm and as they went filled the lane with his plaints.

"I should think you can't deny it. Why, he has actually written a pamphlet to enforce his views upon the subject."

"You should bless your stars, Mr. Chubble, that there is only one. He suffers from pamphlets. He writes 'em and prints 'em and every member of Parliament gets one of 'em for nothing. Pamphlets do for him what the gout does for other old gentlemen—they carry off from his system a great number of disquieting ailments. He's at prison reform now," said Dick with a smile of thorough enjoyment. "Have you heard him on it?"

"No, and I don't want to," Mr. Chubble exploded. He struck viciously at an overhanging bough, as though it was the head of Harold Hazlewood, and went on with the catalogue of crimes. "He

made a speech last week in the town-hall," and he jerked his thumb backwards towards the town they had left. "Intolerable I call it. He actually denounced his own countrymen as a race of oppressors."

"He would," answered Dick calmly. "What did I say to you a minute ago? He's advanced, you know."

"Advanced!" sneered Mr. Chubble and then Dick Hazlewood stopped and contemplated his companion with a thoughtful eye.

"I really don't think you understand my father, Mr. Chubble," said Dick with a gentle remonstrance in his voice which Mr. Chubble was at a loss whether to take seriously or no.

"Can you give me the key to him?" he cried.

"I can."

"Then out with it, my lad."

Mr. Chubble disposed himself to listen but with so bristling an expression that it was clear no explanation could satisfy him. Dick, however, took no heed of that. He spoke slowly as one lecturing to an obtuse class of scholars.

"My father was born predestined to believe that all the people whom he knows are invariably wrong and all the people he doesn't know are invariably right. And when I feel inclined to deplore his abuse of his own country I console myself with the reflection that he would be the staunchest friend of England that England ever had—if only he had been born in Germany."

Mr. Chubble grunted and turned the speech

suspiciously over in his mind. Was Dick poking fun at him or at his father?

"That's bookish," he said.

"I am afraid it is," Dick Hazlewood agreed humbly. "The fact is I am now an Instructor at the Staff College and much is expected of me."

They had reached the gate of Little Beeding House. It was summer time. A yellow drive of gravel ran straight between long broad flower-beds to the door.

"Won't you come in and see my father?" Dick asked innocently. "He's at home."

"No, my lad, no." Mr. Chubble hastened to add: "I haven't the time. But I am very glad to have met *you*. You are here for long?"

"No. Only just for luncheon," said Dick, and he walked along the drive into the house. He was met in the hall by Hubbard the butler, an old colourless man of genteel movements which seemed slow and were astonishingly quick. He spoke in gentle purring tones and was the very butler for Mr. Harold Hazlewood.

"Your father has been asking for you, sir," said Hubbard. "He seems a little anxious. He is in the big room."

"Very well," said Dick, and he crossed the hall and the drawing-room, wondering what new plan for the regeneration of the world was being hatched in his father's sedulous brains. He had received a telegram at Camberley the day before urgently calling upon him to arrive at Little Beeding in time for luncheon. He went into the library

as it was called, but in reality it was the room used by everybody except upon ceremonial occasions. It was a big room; half of it held a billiard table, the other half had writing-tables, lounges, comfortable chairs and a table for bridge. The carpet was laid over a parquet floor so that young people, when they stayed there, rolled it up and danced. There were windows upon two sides of the room. Here a row of them looked down the slope of the lawn to the cedar-trees and the river, there a great bay which opened to the ground, gave a view of a corner of the high churchyard wall and of a meadow and a thatched cottage beyond. In this bay Mr. Hazlewood was standing when Dick entered the room.

"I got your telegram, father, and here I am."

Mr. Hazlewood turned back from the window with a smile upon his face.

"It is good of you, Richard. I wanted you to-day."

A very genuine affection existed between these two, dissimilar as they were in physique and mind. Dick Hazlewood was at this time thirty-four years old, an officer of hard work and distinction, one of the younger men to whom the generals look to provide the brains in the next great war. He had the religion of his type. To keep physically fit for the hardest campaigning and mentally fit for the highest problems of modern strategy and to boast about neither the one qualification nor the other—these were the articles of his creed. In appearance he was a little younger than his

years, lithe, long in the leg, with a thin brown face and grey eyes which twinkled with humour. Harold Hazlewood was intensely proud of him, though he professed to detest his profession. And no doubt he found at times that the mere healthful, well-groomed look of his son was irritatingly conventional. What was quite wholesome could never be quite right in the older man's philosophy. To Dick, on the other hand, his father was an intense enjoyment. Here was a lovable innocent with the most delightful illusion that he understood the world. Dick would draw out his father by the hour, but, as he put it, he wouldn't let the old boy down. He stopped his chaff before it could begin to hurt.

"Well, I am here," he said. "What scrape have you got into now?"

"I am in no scrape, Richard. I don't get into scrapes," replied his father. He shifted from one foot to the other uneasily. "I was wondering, Richard—you have been away all this last year, haven't you?—I was wondering whether you could give me any of your summer."

Dick looked at his father. What in the world was the old boy up to now? he asked himself.

"Of course I can. I shall get my leave in a day or two. I thought of playing some polo here and there. There are a few matches arranged. Then no doubt——" He broke off. "But look here, sir! You didn't send me an urgent telegram merely to ask me that."

"No, Richard, no." Everybody else called his son Dick, but Harold Hazlewood never. He

was Richard. From Richard you might expect much, the awakening of a higher nature, a devotion to the regeneration of the world, humanitarianism, even the cult of all the "antis." From Dick you could expect nothing but health and cleanliness and robustious conventionality. Therefore Richard Captain Hazlewood of the Coldstream and the Staff Corps remained. "No, there was something else."

Mr. Hazlewood took his son by the arm and led him into the bay window. He pointed across the field to the thatched cottage.

"You know who lives there?"

"No."

"Mrs. Ballantyne."

Dick put his head on one side and whistled softly. He knew the general tenour of that *cause célèbre.* Mr. Hazlewood raised remonstrating hands.

"There! You are like the rest, Richard. You take the worst view. Here is a good woman maligned and slandered. There is nothing against her. She was acquitted in open trial by a jury of responsible citizens under a judge of the Highest Court in India. Yet she is left alone—like a leper. She is the victim of gossip and *such* gossip. Richard," said the old man solemnly, "for uncharitableness, ill-nature and stupid malice the gossip of a Sussex village leaves the most deplorable efforts of Voltaire and Swift entirely behind."

"Father, you *are* going it," said Dick with a chuckle. "Do you mean to give me a stepmother?"

"I do not, Richard. Such a monstrous idea

never entered my thoughts. But, my boy, I have called upon her"

"Oh, you have!"

"Yes. I have seen her too. I left a card. She left one upon me. I called again. I was fortunate."

"She was in?"

"She gave me tea, Richard."

Richard cocked his head on one side.

"What's she like, father? Topping?"

"Richard, she gave me tea," said the old man, dwelling insistently upon his repetition.

"So you said, sir, and it was most kind of her to be sure. But that fact won't help me to form even the vaguest picture of her looks."

"But it will, Richard," Mr. Hazlewood protested with a nervousness which set Dick wondering again. "She gave me tea. Therefore, don't you see, I must return the hospitality, which I do with the utmost eagerness. Richard, I look to you to help me. We must champion that slandered lady. You will see her for yourself. She is coming here to luncheon."

The truth was out at last. Yet Dick was aware that he might very easily have guessed it. This was just the quixotic line his father could have been foreseen to take.

"Well, we must just keep our eyes open and see that she doesn't slip anything into the decanters while our heads are turned," said Dick with a chuckle. Old Mr. Hazlewood laid a hand upon his son's shoulder.

"That's the sort of thing they say. Only you don't mean it, Richard, and they do," he remarked with a mild and reproachful shake of the head. "Ah, some day, my boy, your better nature will awaken."

Dick expressed no anxiety for the quick advent of that day.

"How many are there of us to be at luncheon?" asked Dick.

"Only the two of us."

"I see. We are to keep the danger in the family. Very wise, sir, upon my word."

"Richard, you pervert my meaning," said Mr. Hazlewood. "The neighbourhood has not been kind to Mrs. Ballantyne. She has been made to suffer. The Vicar's wife for instance—a most uncharitable person. And my sister, your Aunt Margaret, too, in Great Beeding—she is what you would call——"

"Hot stuff," murmured Dick.

"Quite so," replied Mr. Hazlewood, and he turned to his son with a look of keen interest upon his face. "I am not familiar with the phrase, Richard, but not for the first time I notice that the crude and inelegant vulgarisms in which you abound and which you no doubt pick up in the barrack squares compress a great deal of forcible meaning into very few words."

"That is indeed true, sir," replied Dick with an admirable gravity, "and if I might be allowed to suggest it, a pamphlet upon that interesting subject would be less dangerous work than coquet-

ting with the latest edition of the Marquise de Brinvilliers."

The word pamphlet was a bugle-call to Mr. Hazlewood.

"Ah! Speaking of pamphlets, my boy," he began, and walked over to a desk which was littered with papers.

"We have not the time, sir," Dick interrupted from the bay of the window. A woman had come out from the cottage. She unlatched a little gate in her garden which opened on to the meadow. She crossed it. Yet another gate gave her entrance to the garden of Little Beeding. In a moment Hubbard announced:

"Mrs. Ballantyne;" and Stella came into the room and stood near to the door with a certain constraint in her attitude and a timid watchfulness in her big eyes. She had the look of a deer. It seemed to Dick that at one abrupt movement she would turn and run.

Mr. Hazlewood pressed forward to greet her and she smiled with a warmth of gratitude. Dick, watching her from the bay window, was surprised by the delicacy of her face, by a look of fragility. She was dressed very simply in a coat and short skirt of white, her shoes and her gloves were of white suède, her hat was small.

"And this is my son Richard," said Mr. Hazlewood; and Dick came forward out of the bay. Stella Ballantyne bowed to him but said no word. She was taking no risks even at the hands of the son of her friend. If advances of friendliness

were to be made they must be made by him, not her. There was just one awkward moment of hesitation. Then Dick Hazlewood held out his hand.

"I am very glad to meet you, Mrs. Ballantyne," he said cordially, and he saw the blood rush into her face and the fear die out in her eyes.

The neighbourhood, to quote Mr. Hazlewood, had not been kind to Stella Ballantyne. She had stood in the dock and the fact tarnished her. Moreover here and there letters had come from India. The verdict was inevitable, but—but—there was a doubt about its justice. The full penalty—no. No one desired or would have thought it right, but something betwixt and between in the proper spirit of British compromise would not have been amiss. Thus gossip ran. Moreover Stella Ballantyne was too good-looking, and she wore her neat and simple clothes too well. To some of the women it was an added offence when they considered what she might be wearing if only the verdict had been different. Thus for a year Stella had been left to her own company except for a couple of visits which the Reptons had paid to her. At the first she had welcomed the silence, the peace of her loneliness. It was a balm to her. She recovered like a flower in the night. But she was young—she was twenty-eight this year—and as her limbs ceased to be things of lead and became once more aglow with life there came to her a need of companionship. She tried to tramp the need away on the turf of her well-loved downs, but she failed. A friend to share with her the joy

of these summer days! Her blood clamoured for one. But she was an outcast. Friends did not come her way. Therefore she had gratefully received old Mr. Hazlewood in her house, and had accepted, though with some fear, his proposal that she should lunch at the big house and make the acquaintance of his son.

She was nervous at the beginning of that meal, but both father and son were at the pains to put her at her ease; and soon she was talking naturally, with a colour in her cheeks, and now and then a note of laughter in her voice. Dick worked for the recurrence of that laughter. He liked the clear sound of it and the melting of all her face into sweetness and tender humour which came with it. And for another thing he had a thought, and a true one, that it was very long since she had known the pleasure of good laughter.

They took their coffee out on the lawn under the shade of a huge cedar tree. The river ran at their feet and a Canadian canoe and a rowing-boat were tethered close by in a little dock. The house, a place of grey stone with grey weathered and lichen-coloured slates, raised its great oblong chimneys into a pellucid air. The sunlight flashed upon its rows of tall windows—they were all flat to the house, except the one great bay on the ground floor in the library—and birds called from all the trees. The time slipped away. Dick Hazlewood found himself talking of his work, a practice into which he seldom fell, and was surprised that she could talk of it with him. He realised with a

start how it was that she knew. But she talked naturally and openly, as though he must know her history. Once even some jargon of the Staff College slipped from her. "You were doing let us pretend at Box Hill last week, weren't you?" she said, and when he started at the phrase she imagined that he started at the extent of her information. "It was in the papers," she said. "I read every word of them," and then for a second her face clouded, and she added: "I have time, you see."

She looked at her watch and sprang to her feet.

"I must go," she said. "I didn't know it was so late. I have enjoyed myself very much." She did not hesitate now to offer her hand. "Good-bye."

Dick Hazlewood went with her as far as the gate and came back to his father.

"You were asking me," he said carelessly, "if I could give you some part of the summer. I don't see why I shouldn't come here in a day or two. The polo matches aren't so important."

The old man's eyes brightened.

"I shall be delighted, Richard, if you will." He looked at his son with something really ecstatic in his expression. At last then his better nature was awakening. "I really believe——" he exclaimed and Dick cut him short.

"Yes, it may be that, sir. On the other hand it may not. What is quite clear is that I must catch my train. So if I might order the car?"

"Of course, of course."

He came out with his son into the porch of the house.

"We have done a fine thing to-day, Richard," he said with enthusiasm and a nod towards the cottage beyond the meadow.

"We have indeed, sir," returned Dick cheerily. "Did you ever see such a pair of ankles?"

"She lost the tragic look this afternoon, Richard. We must be her champions."

"We will put in the summer that way, father," said Dick, and waving his hand was driven off to the station.

Mr. Hazlewood walked back to the library. But "walked" is a poor word. He seemed to float on air. A great opportunity had come to him. He had enlisted the services of his son. He saw Dick and himself as Toreadors waving red flags in the face of a bull labelled Conventionality. He went back to the pamphlet on which he was engaged with renewed ardour and laboured diligently far into the night.