CHAPTER XV

THE GREAT CRUSADE

"I WAS in Great Beeding this morning," said Dick, as he sat at luncheon with his father, "and the blinds were up in Aunt Margaret's house."

"They have returned from their holiday then," his father observed with a tremor in his voice. He looked afraid. Then he looked annoyed.

"Pettifer will break down if he doesn't take care," he exclaimed petulantly. "No man with any sense would work as hard as he does. He ought to have taken two months this year at the least."

"We should still have to meet Aunt Margaret at the end of them," said Dick calmly. He had no belief in Mr. Hazlewood's distress at the overwork of Pettifer.

A month had passed since the inauguration of the great Crusade, and though talk was rife everywhere and indignation in many places loud, a certain amount of success had been won. But all this while Mrs. Pettifer had been away. Now she had returned. Mr. Hazlewood stood in some awe of his sister. She was not ill-natured, but she knew her mind and expressed it forcibly and with

out delay. She was of a practical limited nature; she saw very clearly what she saw, but she walked in blinkers, and had neither comprehension of nor sympathy with those of a wider vision. She was at this time a woman of forty, comfortable to look upon and the wife of Mr. Robert Pettifer, the head of the well-known firm of solicitors, Pettifer, Gryll and Musgrave. Mrs. Pettifer had very little patience to spare for the idiosyncrasies of her brother, though she owed him a good deal more than patience. For at the time, some twenty years before, when she had married Robert Pettifer, then merely a junior partner of the firm, Harold Hazlewood had alone stood by her. To the rest of the family she was throwing herself away; to her brother Harold she was doing a fine thing, not because it was a fine thing but because it was an exceptional thing. Robert Pettifer however had prospered, and though he had reached an age when he might have claimed his leisure the nine o'clock train still took him daily to London.

"Aunt Margaret isn't after all so violent," said Dick, for whom she kept a very soft place in her heart. But Harold shook his head.

"Your aunt, Richard, has all the primæval ferocity of the average woman." And then the fires of the enthusiast were set alight in his blue eyes. "I'll tell you what I'll do: I'll send her my new pamphlet, Richard. It may have a humanising influence upon her. I have some advance copies. I'll send her one this afternoon."

Dick's eyes twinkled.

"I should if I were you, though to be sure, sir, we have tried that plan before without any prodigious effect."

"True, Richard, true, but I have never before risen to such heights as these." Mr. Hazlewood threw down his napkin and paced the room. "Richard, I am not inclined to boast. I am a humble man."

"It is only humility, sir, which achieves great work," said Dick, as he went contentedly on with his luncheon.

"But the very title of this pamphlet seems to me calculated to interest the careless and attract the thoughtful. It is called *The Prison Walls must Cast no Shadow.*"

With an arm outstretched he seemed to deliver the words of the title one by one from the palm of his hand. Then he stood smiling, confident, awaiting applause. Dick's face, which had shown the highest expectancy, slowly fell in a profound disappointment. He laid down his knife and fork.

"Oh, come, father. All walls cast shadows. It entirely depends upon the altitude of the sun."

Mr. Hazlewood returned to his seat and spoke gently.

"The phrase, my boy, is a metaphor. I develop in this pamphlet my belief that a convict, once he has expiated his offence, should upon his release be restored to the precise position in society which he held before with all its privileges unimpaired."

Dick chuckled in the most unregenerate delight.

"You are going it, father," he said, and disappointment came to Mr. Hazlewood.

"Richard," he remonstrated mildly, "I hoped that I should have had your approval. It seemed to me that a change was taking place in you, that the player of polo, the wild hunter of an inoffensive little white ball, was developing into the humanitarian."

"Well, sir," rejoined Dick, "I won't deny that of late I have been beginning to think that there is a good deal in your theories. But you mustn't try me too high at the beginning, you know. I am only in my novitiate. However, please send it to Aunt Margaret, and—oh, how I would like to hear her remarks upon it!"

An idea occurred to Mr. Hazlewood.

"Richard, why shouldn't you take it over yourself this afternoon?"

Dick shook his head.

"Impossible, father, I have something to do." He looked out of the window down to the river running dark in the shade of trees. "But I'll go to-morrow morning," he added.

And the next morning he walked over early to Great Beeding. His aunt would have received the pamphlet by the first post and he wished to seize the first fine careless rapture of her comments. But he found her in a mood of distress rather than of wordy impatience.

The Pettifers lived in a big house of the Georgian period at the bottom of an irregular square in the middle of the little town Mrs. Pettifer was sitting

in a room facing the garden at the back with the pamphlet on a little table beside her. She sprang up as Dick was shown into the room, and before he could utter a word of greeting she cried:

"Dick, you are the one person I wanted to see."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Sit down."

Dick obeyed.

"Dick, I believe you are the only person in the world who has any control over your father."

"Yes. Even in my pinafores I learnt the great lesson that to control one's parents is the first duty of the modern child."

"Don't be silly," his aunt rejoined sharply. Then she looked him over. "Yes, you must have some control over him, for he lets you remain in the army, though an army is one of his abominations."

"Theoretically it's a great grief to him," replied Dick. "But you see I have done fairly well, so actually he's ready to burst with pride. Every sentimental philosopher sooner or later breaks his head against his own theories."

Mrs. Pettifer nodded her head in commendation.

"That's an improvement on your last remark, Dick. It's true. And your father's going to break his head very badly unless you stop him."

"How?"

"Mrs. Ballantyne."

All the flippancy died out of Dick Hazlewood's face. He became at once grave, wary.

"I have been hearing about him," continued Mrs.

Pettifer. "He has made friends with her—a woman who has stood in the dock on a capital charge."

"And has been acquitted," Dick Hazlewood added quietly and Mrs. Pettifer blazed up.

"She wouldn't have been acquitted if I had been on the jury. A parcel of silly men who are taken in by a pretty face!" she cried, and Dick broke in:

"Aunt Margaret, I am sorry to interrupt you, but I want you to understand that I am with my father heart and soul in this."

He spoke very slowly and deliberately and Mrs. Pettifer was utterly dismayed.

"You!" she cried. She grew pale, and alarm so changed her face it was as if a tragic mask had been slipped over it. "Oh, Dick, not you!"

"Yes, I. I think it is cruelly hard," he continued with his eyes relentlessly fixed upon Mrs. Pettifer's face, "that a woman like Mrs. Ballantyne, who has endured all the horrors of a trial, the publicity, the suspense, the dread risk that justice might miscarry, should have afterwards to suffer the treatment of a leper."

There was for the moment no room for any anger now in Mrs. Pettifer's thoughts. Consternation possessed her. She weighed every quiet firm word that fell from Dick, she appreciated the feeling which gave them wings, she searched his face, his eyes. Dick had none of his father's flightiness. He was level-headed, shrewd and with the conventions of his times and his profession.

If Dick spoke like this, with so much certitude and so much sympathy, why then—— She shrank from the conclusion with a sinking heart. She became very quiet.

"Oh, she shouldn't have come to Little Beeding," she said in a low voice, staring now upon the ground. It was to herself she spoke, but Dick answered her, and his voice rose to a challenge.

"Why shouldn't she? Here she was born, here she was known. What else should she do but come back to Little Beeding and hold her head high? I respect her pride for doing it."

These were reasons no doubt why Stella should come back; but they did not include the reason why she had. Dick Hazlewood was well aware of it. He had learnt it only the afternoon before when he was with her on the river. But he thought it a reason too delicate, of too fine a gossamer to be offered to the prosaic mind of his Aunt Margaret. With what ridicule and disbelief she would rend it into tatters! Reasons so exquisite were not for her. She could never understand them.

Mrs. Pettifer abandoned her remonstrances and was for dropping the subject altogether. But Dick was obstinate.

"You don't know Mrs. Ballantyne, Aunt Margaret. You are unjust to her because you don't know her. I want you to," he said boldly.

"What!" cried Mrs. Pettifer. "You actually—— Oh!" Indignation robbed her of words. She gasped.

"Yes, I do," continued Dick calmly. "I

want you to come one night and dine at Little Beeding. We'll persuade Mrs. Ballantyne to come too."

It was a bold move, and even in his eyes it had its risks for Stella. To bring Mrs. Pettifer and her together was, so it seemed to him, to mix earth with delicate flame. But he had great faith in Stella Ballantyne. Let them but meet and the earth might melt—who could tell? At the worst his aunt would bristle, and there were his father and himself to see that the bristles did not prick.

"Yes, come and dine."

Mrs. Pettifer had got over her amazement at her nephew's audacity. Curiosity had taken its place—curiosity and fear. She must see this woman for herself.

"Yes," she answered after a pause. "I will come. I'll bring Robert too."

"Good. We'll fix up a date and write to you. Goodbye."

Dick went back to Little Beeding and asked for his father. The old gentleman added to his other foibles that of a collector. It was the only taste he had which was really productive, for he owned a collection of miniatures, gathered together throughout his life, which would have realised a fortune if it had been sold at Christie's. He kept it arranged in cabinets in the library and Dick found him bending over one of the drawers and rearranging his treasures.

"I have seen Aunt Margaret," he said. "She will meet Stella here at dinner."

"That will be splendid," cried the old man with enthusiasm.

"Perhaps," replied his son; and the next morning the Pettifers received their invitation.

Mrs. Pettifer accepted it at once. She had not been idle since Dick had left her. Before he had come she had merely looked upon the crusade as one of Harold Hazlewood's stupendous follies. But after he had gone she was genuinely horrified. She saw Dick speaking with the set dogged look and the hard eyes which once or twice she had seen before. He had always got his way, she remembered, on those occasions. She drove round to her friends and made inquiries. At each house her terrors were confirmed. It was Dick now who led the crusade. He had given up his polo, he was spending all his leave at Little Beeding and most of it with Stella Ballantyne. He lent her a horse and rode with her in the morning, he rowed her on the river in the afternoon. He bullied his friends to call on her. He brandished his friendship with her like a flag. Love me, love my Stella was his new motto. Mrs. Pettifer drove home with every fear exaggerated. Dick's career would be ruined altogether—even if nothing worse were to happen. To any view that Stella Ballantyne might hold she hardly gave a thought. She was sure of what it would be. Stella Ballantyne would jump at her nephew. He had good looks, social position, money and a high reputation. It was the last quality which would give him a unique value in Stella Ballantyne's eyes. He was not one of the

chinless who haunt the stage doors; nor again one of that more subtly-decadent class which seeks to attract sensation by linking itself to notoriety. No. From Stella's point of view Dick Hazlewood must be the ideal husband.

Mrs. Pettifer waited for her husband's return that evening with unusual impatience, but she was wise enough to hold her tongue until dinner was over and he with a cigar between his lips and a glass of old brandy on the table-cloth in front of him, disposed to amiability and concession.

Then, however, she related her troubles.

"You see it must be stopped, Robert."

Robert Pettifer was a lean wiry man of fifty-five whose brown dried face seemed by a sort of climatic change to have taken on the colour of the binding of his law-books. He too was a little troubled by the story, but he was of a fair and cautious mind.

"Stopped?" he said. "How? We can't arrest Mrs. Ballantyne again."

"No," replied Mrs. Pettifer. "Robert, you must do something."

Robert Pettifer jumped in his chair.

"I, Margaret! Lord love you, no! I decline to mix myself up in the matter at all. Dick's a grown man and Mrs. Ballantyne has been acquitted."

Margaret Pettifer knew her husband.

"Is that your last word?" she asked ruefully

"Absolutely."

"It isn't mine, Robert."

Robert Pettifer chuckled and laid a hand upon his wife's.

"I know that, Margaret."

"We are going to dine next Friday night at Little Beeding to meet Stella Ballantyne."

Mr. Pettifer was startled but he held his tongue.

"The invitation came this morning after you had left for London," she added.

"And you accepted it at once?"

"Yes."

Pettifer was certain that she had before she opened her mouth to answer him.

"I shall dine at Little Beeding on Friday," he said, "because Harold always gives me an admirable glass of vintage port;" and with that he dismissed the subject. Mrs. Pettifer was content to let it smoulder in his mind. She was not quite sure that he was as disturbed as she wished him to be, but that he was proud of Dick she knew, and if by any chance uneasiness grew strong in him, why, sooner or later he would let fall some little sentence; and that little sentence would probably be useful.