CHAPTER XVI

CONSEQUENCES

THE dinner-party at Little Beeding was a small affair. There were but ten altogether who sat down at Mr. Hazlewood's dinner-table and with the exception of the Pettifers all, owing to Dick Hazlewood's insistence, were declared partisans of Stella Ballantyne. None the less Stella came to it with hesitation. It was the first time that she had dined abroad since she had left India, now the best part of eighteen months ago, and she went forth to it as to an ordeal. For though friends of hers would be present to enhearten her she was to meet the Pettifers. The redoubtable Aunt Margaret had spoilt her sleep for a week. It was for the Pettifers she dressed, careful to choose neither white nor black, lest they should find something symbolic in the colour of her gown and make of it an offence. She put on a frock of pale blue satin trimmed with some white lace which had belonged to her mother, and she wore not so much as a thin gold chain about her neck. But she did not need jewels that night. The months of quiet had restored her to her beauty, the excitement of this evening had given life and

colour to her face, the queer little droop at the corners of her lips which had betrayed so much misery and bitterness of spirit had vanished altogether. Yet when she was quite dressed and her mirror bade her take courage she sat down and wrote a note of apology pleading a sudden indisposition. But she did not send it. Even in the writing her cowardice came home to her and she tore it up before she had signed her name. The wheels of the cab which was to take her to the big house rattled down the lane under her windows, and slipping her cloak over her shoulders she ran downstairs.

The party began with a little constraint. Mr. Hazlewood received his guests in his drawing-room and it had the chill and the ceremony of a room which is seldom used. But the constraint wore off at the table. Most of those present were striving to set Stella Ballantyne at her ease, and she was at a comfortable distance from Mrs. Pettifer, with Mr. Hazlewood at her side. She was conscious that she was kept under observation and from time to time the knowledge made her uncomfortable.

"I am being watched," she said to her host.

"You mustn't mind," replied Mr. Hazlewood, and the smile came back to her lips as she glanced round the table.

"Oh, I don't, I don't," she said in a low voice, "for I have friends here."

"And friends who will not fail you, Stella," said the old man. "To-night begins the great change. You'll see."

Robert Pettifer puzzled her indeed more than his wife. She was plain to read. She was frigidly polite, her enemy. Once or twice, however, Stella turned her head to find Robert Pettifer's eyes resting upon her with a quiet scrutiny which betrayed nothing of his thoughts. As a matter of fact he liked her manner. She was neither defiant nor servile, neither loud nor over-silent. She had been through fire; that was evident. But it was evident only because of a queer haunting look which came and went in her dark eyes. The fire had not withered her. Indeed Pettifer was surprised. He had not formulated his expectations at all, but he had not expected what he saw. The clear eyes and the fresh delicate colour, her firm white shoulders and her depth of bosom forced him to think of her as wholesome. He began to turn over in his mind his recollections of her case, recollections which he had been studious not to revive.

Half-way through the dinner Stella lost her uneasiness. The lights, the ripple of talk, the company of men and women, the bright dresses had their effect on her. It was as though after a deep plunge into dark waters she had come to the surface and flung out her arms to the sun. She ceased to notice the scrutiny of the Pettifers. She looked across the table to Dick and their eyes met; and such a look of tenderness transfigured her face as made Mrs. Pettifer turn pale.

"That woman's in love," she said to herself and she was horrified. It wasn't Dick's social

position then or the shelter of his character that Stella Ballantyne coveted. She was in love. Mrs. Pettifer was honest enough to acknowledge it. But she knew now that the danger which she had feared was infinitely less than the danger which actually was.

"I must have it out with Harold to-night," she said, and later on, when the men came from the dining-room, she looked out for her husband. But at first she did not see him. She was in the drawing-room and the wide double doors which led to the big library stood open. It was through those doors that the men had come. Some of the party were gathered there. She could hear the click of the billiard balls and the voices of women mingling with those of the men. She went through the doors and saw her husband standing by Harold Hazlewood's desk, and engrossed apparently in some little paper-covered book which he held in his hand. She crossed to him at once.

"Robert," she said, "don't be in a hurry to go to-night. I must have a word with Harold."

"All right," said Pettifer, but he said it in so absent a voice that his wife doubted whether he had understood her words. She was about to repeat them when Harold Hazlewood himself approached.

"You are looking at my new pamphlet, Pettifer, *The Prison Walls must Cast no Shadow.* I am hoping that it will have a great influence."

"No," replied Pettifer. "I wasn't. I was looking at this," and he held up the little book.

"Oh that?" said Hazlewood, turning away with disappointment.

"Yes, that," said Pettifer with a strange and thoughtful look at his brother-in-law. "And I am not sure," he added slowly, "that in a short time you will not find it the more important publication of the two."

He laid the book down and in his turn he moved away towards the billiard-table. Margaret Pettifer remained. She had been struck by the curious deliberate words her husband had used. Was this the hint for which she was looking out? She took up the little book. It was a copy of *Notes and Queries*. She opened it.

It was a small periodical magazine made up of printed questions which contributors sent in search of information and answers to those questions from the pens of other contributors. Mrs. Pettifer glanced through the leaves, hoping to light upon the page which her husband had been studying. But he had closed the book when he laid it down and she found nothing to justify his remark. Yet he had not spoken without intention. Of that she was convinced, and her conviction was strengthened the next moment, for as she turned again towards the drawing-room Robert Pettifer looked once sharply towards her and as sharply away. Mrs. Pettifer understood that glance. He was wondering whether she had noticed what in that magazine had interested him. But she did not pursue him with questions. She merely made up her mind to examine the copy of *Notes*

and Queries at a time when she could bring more leisure to the task.

She waited impatiently for the party to break up but eleven o'clock had struck before any one proposed to go. Then all took their leave at once. Robert Pettifer and his wife went out into the hall with the rest, lest others seeing them remain should stay behind too; and whilst they stood a little apart from the general bustle of departure Margaret Pettifer saw Stella Ballantyne come lightly down the stairs, and a savage fury suddenly whirled in her head and turned her dizzy. She thought of all the trouble and harm this young woman was bringing into their ordered family and she would not have it that she was innocent. She saw Stella with her cloak open upon her shoulders radiant and glistening and slender against the dark panels of the staircase, youth in her face, enjoyment sparkling in her eyes, and her fingers itched to strip her of her bright frock, her gloves, her slim satin slippers, the delicate white lace which nestled against her bosom. She clothed her in the heavy shapeless garments, the coarse shoes and stockings of the convict; she saw her working desperately against time upon an ignoble task with black and broken finger-nails. If longing could have worked the miracle, thus at this hour would Stella Ballantyne have sat and worked, all the colour of her faded to a hideous drab, all the grace of her withered. Mrs. Pettifer turned away with so abrupt a movement and so disordered a face that Robert asked her if she was ill.

"No, it's nothing," she said and against her will her eyes were drawn back to the staircase. But Stella Ballantyne had disappeared and Margaret Pettifer drew her breath in relief. She felt that there had been danger in her moment of passion, danger and shame; and already enough of those two evils waited about them.

Stella, meanwhile, with a glance towards Dick Hazlewood, had slipped back into the big room. Then she waited for a moment until the door opened and Dick came in.

"I had not said good-night to you," she exclaimed, coming towards him and giving him her hands, "and I wanted to say it to you here, when we were alone. For I must thank you for to-night, you and your father. Oh, I have no words."

The tears were very near to her eyes and they were audible in her low voice. Dick Hazlewood was quick to answer her.

"Good! For there's need of none. Will you ride to-morrow?"

Stella took her hands from his and moved across the room towards the great bay window with its glass doors.

"I should love to," she said.

"Eight. Is that too early after to-night?"

"No, that's the good time," she returned with a smile. "We have the day at its best and the world to ourselves."

"I'll bring the same horse round. He knows you now, doesn't he?"

"Thank you," said Stella. She unlatched the

glass door and opened it. "You'll look it after me?"

"No," said Dick. "I'll see you to your door."

But Stella refused his company. She stood in the doorway.

"There's no need! See what a night it is!" and the beauty of it crept into her soul and stilled her voice. The moon rode in a blue sky, a disc of glowing white, the great cedar-trees flung their shadows wide over the bright lawns and not a branch stirred.

"Listen," said Stella in a whisper, and the river, rippling against its bank with now a deep sob and now a fairy's laugh, sang to them in notes most musical and clear. That liquid melody and the flutter of a bird's wings in the bough of a tree were the only sounds. They stood side by side, she looking out over the garden to the dim and pearly hills, he gazing at her uplifted face and the pure column of her throat. They stood in a most dangerous silence. The air came cool and fresh to their nostrils. Stella drew it in with a smile.

"Good-night!" She laid her hand for a second on his arm. "Don't come with me!"

"Why not?"

And the answer came in a clear whisper:

"I am afraid."

Stella seemed to feel the man at her side suddenly grow very still. "It's only a step," she went on quickly and she passed out of the window on to the pathway. Dick Hazlewood followed but she turned to him and raised her hand.

"Don't," she pleaded; the voice was troubled but her eyes were steady. "If you come with me I shall tell you."

"What?" he interrupted, and the quickness of the interruption broke the spell which the night had laid upon her.

"I shall tell you again how much I thank you," she said lightly. "I shall cross the meadow by the garden gate. That brings me to my door."

She gathered her skirt in her hand and crossed the pathway to the edge of the grass.

"You can't do that," exclaimed Dick and he was at her side. He stooped and felt the turf. "Even the lawn's drenched. Crossing the meadow you'll be ankle-deep in dew. You must promise never to go home across the meadow when you dine with us."

He spoke, chiding her as if she had been a mutinous child, and with so much anxiety that she laughed.

"You see, you have become rather precious to me," he added.

Though the month was July she that night was all April, half tears, half laughter. The smile passed from her lips and she raised her hands to her face with the swiftness of one who has been struck.

"What's the matter?" he asked, and she drew her hand away.

"Don't you understand?" she asked, and answered the question herself. "No, why should you?" She turned to him suddenly, her bosom heaving, her hands clenched. "Do you know

what place I fill here, in my own county? Years ago, when I was a child, there was supposed to be a pig-faced woman in Great Beeding. She lived in a small yellow cottage in the Square. It was pointed out to strangers as one of the sights of the town. Sometimes they were shown her shadow after dusk between the lamp and the blind. Sometimes you might have even caught a glimpse of her slinking late at night along the dark alleys. Well, the pig-faced woman has gone and I have taken her place."

"No," cried Dick. "That's not true."

"It is," she answered passionately. "I am the curiosity. I am the freak. The townspeople take a pride in me, yes, just the same pride they took in her, and I find that pride more difficult to bear than all the aversion of the Pettifers. I too slink out early in the morning or late after night has fallen. And you"—the passion of bitterness died out of her voice, her hands opened and hung at her sides, a smile of tenderness shone on her face—"you come with me. You ride with me early. With you I learn to take no heed. You welcome me to your house. You speak to me as you spoke just now." Her voice broke and a cry of gladness escaped from her which went to Dick Hazlewood's heart. "Oh, you shall see me to my door. I'll not cross the meadow. I'll go round by the road." She stopped and drew a breath.

"I'll tell you something."

"What?"

"It's rather good to be looked after. I know.

It has never happened to me before. Yes, it's very good," and she drew out the words with a low laugh of happiness.

"Stella!" he said, and at the mention of her name she caught her hands up to her heart. "Oh, thank you!"

The hall-door was closed, all but one car had driven away when they turned the corner of the house and came out in the broad drive. They walked in the moonlight with a perfume of flowers in the air and the big yellow cups of the evening primroses gleaming on either side. They walked slowly. Stella knew that she should quicken her feet, but she could not bring herself to do more than know it. She sought to take into her heart every tiniest detail of that walk so that in memory she might, years after, walk it again and so never be quite alone. They passed out through the great iron gates and turned into the lane. Here great elms overhung and now they walked in darkness, and now again were bathed in light. A twig snapped beneath her foot; even so small a thing she would remember.

"We must hurry," she said.

"We are doing all that we can," replied Dick. "It's a long way—this walk."

"You feel it so?" said Stella, tempting him—oh unwisely! But the spell of the hour and the place was upon her.

"Yes," he answered her. "It's a long way in a man's life," and he drew close to her side.

"No!" she cried with a sudden violence. But

she was awake too late. "No, Dick, no," she repeated, but his arms were about her.

"Stella, I want you. Oh, life's dull for a man without a woman; I can tell you," he exclaimed passionately.

"There are others—plenty," she said, and tried to thrust him away.

"Not for me," he rejoined, and he would not let her go. Her struggles ceased, she buried her face in his coat, her hands caught his shoulders, she stood trembling and shivering against him.

"Stella," he whispered. "Stella!"

He raised her face and bent to it. Then he straightened himself.

"Not here!" he said.

They were standing in the darkness of a tree. He put his arms about her waist and lifted her into an open space where the moonlight shone bright and clear and there were no shadows.

"Here," he said, and he kissed her on the lips. She thrust her head back, her face uplifted to the skies, her eyes closed.

"Oh, Dick," she murmured, "I meant that this should never be. Even now—you shall forget it."

"No—I couldn't."

"So one says. But—oh, it would be your ruin." She started away from him.

"Listen!"

"Yes," he answered.

She stood confronting him desperately a yard or so away, her bosom heaving, her face wet with her tears. Dick Hazlewood did not stir. Stella's

lips moved as though she were speaking, but no words were audible, and it seemed that her strength left her. She came suddenly forward, groping with her hands like a blind person.

"Oh, my dear," she said as he caught them. They went on again together. She spoke of his father, of the talk of the countryside. But he had an argument for each of hers.

"Be brave for just a little, Stella. Once we are married there will be no trouble," and with his arms about her she was eager to believe.

Stella Ballantyne sat late that night in the armchair in her bedroom, her eyes fixed upon the empty grate, in a turmoil of emotion. She grew cold and shivered. A loud noise of birds suddenly burst through the open window. She went to it. The morning had come. She looked across the meadow to the silent house of Little Beeding in the grey broadening light. All the blinds were down. Were they all asleep or did one watch like her? She came back to the fireplace. In the grate some torn fragments of a letter caught her eyes. She stooped and picked them up. They were fragments of the letter of regret which she had written earlier that evening.

"I should have sent it," she whispered. "I should not have gone. I should have sent the letter."

But the regret was vain. She had gone. Her maid found her in the morning lying upon her bed in a deep sleep and still wearing the dress in which she had gone out.