

CHAPTER XVII

TROUBLE FOR MR. HAZLEWOOD

WHEN Dick and Stella walked along the drive to the lane, Harold Hazlewood, who was radiant at the success of his dinner-party, turned to Robert Pettifer in the hall.

“Have a whisky-and-soda, Robert, before you go,” he said. He led the way back into the smoking-room. Behind him walked the Pettifers, Robert ill-at-ease and wishing himself a hundred miles away, Margaret Pettifer boiling for battle. Hazlewood himself dropped into an arm-chair.

“I am very glad that you came to-night, Margaret,” he said boldly. “You have seen for yourself.”

“Yes, I have,” she replied. “Harold, there have been moments this evening when I could have screamed.”

Robert Pettifer hurriedly turned towards the table in the far corner of the room where the tray with the decanters and the syphons had been placed.

“Margaret, I pass my life in a scream at the injustice of the world,” said Harold Hazlewood, and Robert Pettifer chuckled as he cut off the

end of a cigar. "It is strange that an act of reparation should move you in the same way."

"Reparation!" cried Margaret Pettifer indignantly. Then she noticed that the window was open. She looked around the room. She drew up a chair in front of her brother.

"Harold, if you have no consideration for us, none for your own position, none for the neighbourhood, if you will at all costs force this woman upon us, don't you think that you might still spare a thought for your son?"

Robert Pettifer had kept his eyes open that evening as well as his wife. He took a step down into the room. He was anxious to take no part in the dispute; he desired to be just; he was favourably inclined towards Stella Ballantyne; looking at her he had been even a little moved. But Dick was the first consideration. He had no children of his own, he cared for Dick as he would have cared for his son, and when he went up each morning by the train to his office in London there lay at the back of his mind the thought that one day the fortune he was amassing would add a splendour to Dick's career. Harold Hazlewood alone of the three seemed to have his eyes sealed.

"Why, what on earth do you mean, Margaret?"

Margaret Pettifer sat down in her chair.

"Where was Dick yesterday afternoon?"

"Margaret, I don't know."

"I do. I saw him. He was with Stella Ballantyne on the river—in the dusk—in a Canadian

canoe." She uttered each fresh detail in a more indignant tone, as though it aggravated the crime. Yet even so she had not done. There was, it seemed, a culminating offence. "She was wearing a white lace frock with a big hat."

"Well," said Mr. Hazlewood mildly, "I don't think I have anything against big hats."

"She was trailing her hand in the water—that he might notice its slenderness of course. Outrageous I call it!"

Mr. Hazlewood nodded his head at his indignant sister.

"I know that frame of mind very well, Margaret," he remarked. "She cannot do right. If she had been wearing a small hat she would have been Frenchified."

But Mrs. Pettifer was not in a mood for argument.

"Can't you see what it all means?" she cried in exasperation.

"I can. I do," Mr. Hazlewood retorted and he smiled proudly upon his sister. "The boy's better nature is awakening."

Margaret Pettifer lifted up her hands.

"The boy!" she exclaimed. "He's thirty-four if he's a day."

She leaned forward in her chair and pointing up to the bay asked: "Why is that window open, Harold?"

Harold Hazlewood showed his first sign of discomfort. He shifted in his chair.

"It's a hot night, Margaret."

"That is not the reason," Mrs. Pettifer retorted implacably. "Where is Dick?"

"I expect that he is seeing Mrs. Ballantyne home."

"Exactly," said Mrs. Pettifer with a world of significance in her voice. Mr. Hazlewood sat up and looked at his sister.

"Margaret, you want to make me uncomfortable," he exclaimed pettishly. "But you shan't. No, my dear, you shan't." He let himself sink back again and joining the tips of his fingers contemplated the ceiling. But Margaret was in the mind to try. She shot out her words at him like so many explosive bullets.

"Being friends is one thing, Harold. Marrying is another."

"Very true, Margaret, very true."

"They are in love with one another."

"Rubbish, Margaret, rubbish."

"I watched them at the dinner-table and afterwards. They are man and woman, Harold. That's what you don't understand. They are not illustrations of your theories. Ask Robert."

"No," exclaimed Robert Pettifer. He hurriedly lit a cigar. "Any inference I should make must be purely hypothetical."

"Yes, we'll ask Robert. Come, Pettifer!" cried Mr. Hazlewood. "Let us have your opinion."

Robert Pettifer came reluctantly down from his corner.

"Well, if you insist, I think they were very friendly"

“Ah!” cried Hazlewood in triumph. “Being friends is one thing, Margaret. Marrying is another.”

Mrs. Pettifer shook her head over her brother with a most aggravating pity.

“Dick said a shrewd thing the other day to me, Harold.”

Mr. Hazlewood looked doubtfully at his sister.

“I am sure of it,” he answered, but he was careful not to ask for any repetition of the shrewd remark. Margaret, however, was not in the mind to let him off.

“He said that sentimental philosophers sooner or later break their heads against their own theories. Mark those words, Harold! I hope they won’t come true of you. I hope so very much indeed.”

But it was abundantly clear that she had not a shadow of doubt that they would come true. Mr. Hazlewood was stung by the slighting phrase.

“I am not a sentimental philosopher,” he said hotly. “Sentiment I altogether abhor. I hold strong views, I admit.”

“You do indeed,” his sister interrupted with an ironical laugh. “Oh, I have read your pamphlet, Harold. The prison walls must cast no shadow and convicts, once they are released, have as much right to sit down at our dinner-tables as they had before. Well, you carry your principles into practice, that I will say. We had an illustration to-night.”

“You are unjust, Margaret,” and Mr. Hazle-

wood rose from his chair with some dignity. " You speak of Mrs. Ballantyne, not for the first time, as if she had been tried and condemned. In fact she was tried and acquitted," and in his turn he appealed to Pettifer.

" Ask Robert ! " he said.

But Pettifer was slow to answer, and when he did it was without assurance.

" Ye-es," he replied with something of a drawl. " Undoubtedly Mrs. Ballantyne was tried and acquitted ; " and he left the impression on the two who heard him that with acquittal quite the last word had not been said. Mrs. Pettifer looked at him eagerly. She drew clear at once of the dispute. She left the questions now to Harold Hazlewood, and Pettifer had spoken with so much hesitation that Harold Hazlewood could not but ask them.

" You are making reservations, Robert ? "

Pettifer shrugged his shoulders.

" I think we have a right to know them," Hazlewood insisted. " You are a solicitor with a great business and consequently a wide experience."

" Not of criminal cases, Hazlewood. I bring no more authority to judge them than any other man."

" Still you have formed an opinion. Please let me have it," and Mr. Hazlewood sat down again and crossed his knees. But a little impatience was now audible in his voice.

" An opinion is too strong a word," replied Pettifer guardedly. " The trial took place nearly

eighteen months ago. I read the accounts of it certainly day by day as I travelled in the train to London. But they were summaries."

"Full summaries, Robert," said Hazlewood.

"No doubt. The trial made a great deal of noise in the world. But they were not full enough for me. Even if my memory of those newspaper reports were clear I should still hesitate to sit in judgment. But my memory isn't clear. Let us see what I do remember."

Pettifer took a chair and sat for a few moments with his forehead wrinkled in a frown. Was he really trying to remember? His wife asked herself that question as she watched him. Or had he something to tell them which he meant to let fall in his own cautiously careless way? Mrs. Pettifer listened alertly.

"The—well—let us call it the catastrophe—took place in a tent in some state of Rajputana."

"Yes," said Mr. Hazlewood.

"It took place at night. Mrs. Ballantyne was asleep in her bed. The man Ballantyne was found outside the tent in the doorway."

"Yes."

Pettifer paused. "So many law cases have engaged my attention since," he said in apology for his hesitation. He seemed quite at a loss. Then he went on:

"Wait a moment! A man had been dining with them at night—oh yes, I begin to remember.

Harold Hazlewood made a tiny movement and

would have spoken, but Margaret held out a hand towards him swiftly.

"Yes, a man called Thresk," said Pettifer, and again he was silent.

"Well," asked Hazlewood.

"Well—that's all I remember," replied Pettifer briskly. He rose and put his chair back. "Except——" he added slowly.

"Yes?"

"Except that there was left upon my mind when the verdict was published a vague feeling of doubt."

"There!" cried Mrs. Pettifer triumphantly. "You hear him, Harold."

But Hazlewood paid no attention to her. He was gazing at his brother-in-law with a good deal of uneasiness.

"Why?" he asked. "Why were you in doubt, Robert?"

But Pettifer had said all that he had any mind to say.

"Oh, I can't remember why," he exclaimed. "I am very likely quite wrong. Come, Margaret, it's time that we were getting home."

He crossed over to Hazlewood and held out his hand. Hazlewood, however, did not rise.

"I don't think that's quite fair of you, Robert," he said. "You don't disturb my confidence, of course—I have gone into the case thoroughly—but I think you ought to give me a chance of satisfying you that your doubts have no justification."

"No really," exclaimed Pettifer. "I absolutely refuse to mix myself up in the affair at all." A step sounded upon the gravel path outside the window. Pettifer raised a warning finger. "It's midnight, Margaret," he said. "We must go;" and as he spoke Dick Hazlewood walked in through the open window.

He smiled at the group of his relations with a grim amusement. They certainly wore a guilty look. He was surprised to remark some embarrassment even upon his father's face.

"You will see your aunt off, Richard," said Mr. Hazlewood.

"Of course."

The Pettifers and Dick went out into the hall, leaving the old man in his chair, a little absent, perhaps a little troubled.

"Aunt Margaret, you have been upsetting my father," said Dick.

"Nonsense, Dick," she replied, and her face flushed. She stepped into the carriage quickly to avoid questions, and as she stepped in Dick noticed that she was carrying a little paper-covered book. Pettifer followed. "Good-night, Dick," he said, and he shook hands with his nephew very warmly. In spite of his cordiality, however, Dick's face grew hard as he watched the carriage drive away. Stella was right. The Pettifers were the enemy. Well, he had always known there would be a fight, and now the sooner it came the better. He went back to the smoking-room and as he opened the door he heard his father's voice.

The old man was sitting sunk in his chair and repeating to himself:

“I won’t believe it. I won’t believe it.”

He stopped at once when Dick came in. Dick looked at him with concern.

“You are tired, father,” he said.

“Yes; I think I am a little. I’ll go to bed.”

Hazlewood watched Dick walk over to the corner table where the candles stood beside the tray, and his face cleared. For the first time in his life the tidy well-groomed conventional look of his son was a real pleasure to him. Richard was of those to whom the good-will of the world meant much. He would never throw it lightly away. Hazlewood got up and took one of the candles from his son. He patted him on the shoulder. He became quite at ease as he looked into his face.

“Good-night, my boy,” he said.

“Good-night, sir,” replied Dick cheerfully. “There’s nothing like acting up to one’s theories, is there?”

“Nothing,” said the old man heartily. “Look at my life!”

“Yes,” replied Dick. “And now look at mine. I am going to marry Stella Ballantyne.”

For a moment Mr. Hazlewood stood perfectly still. Then he murmured lamely:

“Oh, are you? Are you, Richard?” and he shuffled quickly out of the room.