CHAPTER XVIII

MR. HAZLEWOOD SEEKS ADVICE

As Dick was getting out of bed at half-past seven a troubled little note was brought to him written hurriedly and almost incoherent.

"Dick, I can't ride with you this morning. I am too tired . . . and I don't think we should meet again. You must forget last night. I shall be very proud always to remember it, but I won't ruin you, Dick. You mustn't think I shall suffer so very much . . . " Dick read it all through with a smile of tenderness upon his face. He wrote a line in reply. "I will come and see you at eleven, Stella. Meanwhile sleep, my dear," and sent it across to the cottage. Then he rolled back into bed again and took his own advice. It was late when he came down into the dining-room and he took his breakfast alone.

"Where's my father?" he asked of Hubbard the butler.

"Mr. Hazlewood breakfasted half an hour ago, sir. He's at work now."

"Capital," said Dick. "Give me some sausages, Hubbard, what would you say if I told you that I was going to be married?"

Hubbard placed a plate in front of him.

"I should keep my head, sir," he answered in his gentle voice. "Will you take tea?"

"Thank you."

Dick looked out of the window. It was a morning of clear skies and sunlight, a very proper morning for this the first of all the remarkable days which one after the other were going especially to belong to him. He was of the gods now. The world was his property, or rather he held it in trust for Stella. It was behaving well; Dick Hazlewood was contented. He ate a large breakfast and strolling into the library lit his pipe. There was his father bending over his papers at his writing-table before the window, busy as a bee no doubt at some new enthusiasm which was destined to infuriate his neighbours. Let him go on! Dick smiled benignly at the old man's back. Then he frowned. It was curious that his father had not wished him a good-morning, curious and unusual.

"I hope, sir, that you slept well," he said.

"I did not, Richard," and still the back was turned to him. "I lay awake considering with some care what you told me last night about—about Stella Ballantyne."

Of late she had been simply Stella to Harold Hazlewood. The addition of Ballantyne was significant. It replaced friendliness with formality.

"Yes, we agreed to champion her cause, didn't we?" said Dick cheerily. "You took one good step forward last night, I took another."

"You took a long stride, Richard, and I think you might have consulted me first."

Dick walked over to the table at which his father sat.

"Do you know, that's just what Stella said," he remarked, and he seemed to find the suggestion rather unintelligible. Mr. Hazlewood snatched at any support which was offered to him.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, and for the first time that morning he looked his son in the face. "There now, Richard, you see!"

"Yes," Richard returned imperturbably. "But I was able to remove all her fears. I was able to tell her that you would welcome our marriage with all your heart, for you would look upon it as a triumph for your principles and a sure sign that my better nature was at last thoroughly awake."

Dick walked away from the table. The old man's face lengthened. If he was a philosopher at all, he was a philosopher in a piteous position, for he was having his theories tested upon himself, he was to be the experiment by which they should be proved or disproved.

"No doubt," he said in a lamentable voice. "Quite so, Richard. Yes," and he caught at vague hopes of delay. "There's no hurry of course. For one thing I don't want to lose you. . . . And then you have your career to think of, haven't you?" Mr. Hazlewood found himself here upon ground more solid and leaned his weight on it. "Yes, there's your career."

Dick returned to his father, amazement upon his face. He spoke as one who cannot believe the evidence of his ears.

"But it's in the army, father! Do you realise what you are saying? You want me to think of my career in the British Army?"

Consistency however had no charms for Mr. Hazlewood at this moment.

"Exactly," he cried. "We don't want to prejudice that—do we? No, no, Richard! Oh, I hear the finest things about you. And they push the young men along nowadays. You don't have to wait for grey hairs before you're made a General, Richard, so we must keep an eye on our prospects, eh? And for that reason it would be advisable perhaps"—and the old man's eyes fell from Dick's face to his papers—"yes, it would certainly be advisable to let your engagement remain for a while just a private matter between the three of us."

He took up his pen as though the matter was decided and discussion at an end. But Dick did not move from his side. He was the stronger of the two and in a little while the old man's eyes wandered up to his face again. There was a look there which Margaret Pettifer had seen a week ago. Dick spoke and the voice he used was strange and formidable to his father.

"There must be no secrecy father. I remember what you said: for uncharitable slander an English village is impossible to beat. Our secret would be known within a week and by attempting

to keep it we invite suspicion. Nothing could be more damaging to Stella than secrecy. Consequently nothing could be more damaging to me. I don't deny that things are going to be a little difficult. 'But of this I am sure"—and his voice, though it still was quiet, rang deep with confidence —"our one chance is to hold our heads high. No secrecy, father! My hope is to make a life which has been very troubled know some comfort and a little happiness."

Mr. Hazlewood had no more to say. He must renounce his gods or hold his tongue. And renounce his gods—no, that he could not do. He heard in imagination the whole neighbourhood laughing—he saw it a sea of laughter overwhelming him. He shivered as he thought of it. He, Harold Hazlewood, the man emancipated from the fictions of society, caught like a silly struggling fish in the net of his own theories! No, that must never be. He flung himself at his work. He was revising the catalogue of his miniatures and in a minute he began to fumble and search about his over-loaded desk.

"Everybody is trying to thwart me this morning," he cried angrily.

"What's the matter, father?" asked Dick, laying down the *Times*. "Can I help?"

"I wrote a question to *Notes and Queries* about the Marie Antoinette miniature which I bought at Lord Mirliton's sale and there was an answer in the last number, a very complete answer. But I can't find it. I can't find it anywhere;" and

he tossed his papers about as though he were punishing them.

Dick helped in the search, but beyond a stray copy or two of *The Prison Walls must Cast no Shadow*, there was no publication to be found at all.

"Wait a bit, father," said Dick suddenly. "What is *Notes and Queries* like? The only notes and queries I read are contained in a pink paper. They are very amusing but they do not deal with miniatures."

Mr. Hazlewood described the appearance of the little magazine.

"Well, that's very extraordinary," said Dick, "for Aunt Margaret took it away last night."

Mr. Hazlewood looked at his son in blank astonishment.

"Are you sure, Richard?"

"I saw it in her hand as she stepped into her carriage."

Mr. Hazlewood banged his fist upon the table.

"It's extremely annoying of Margaret," he exclaimed. "She takes no interest in such matters. She is not, if I may use the word, a virtuoso. She did it solely to annoy me."

"Well, I wonder," said Dick. He looked at his watch. It was eleven o'clock. He went out into the hall, picked up a straw hat and walked across the meadow to the thatched cottage on the river-bank. But while he went he was still wondering why in the world Margaret had taken away that harmless little magazine from his father's writing-table. "Pettifer's at the bottom of it,"

he concluded. "There's a foxy fellow for you. I'll keep my eye on Uncle Robert." He was near to the cottage. Only a rail separated its garden from the meadow. Beyond the garden a window stood open and within the room he saw the flutter of a lilac dress.

From the window of the library Mr. Hazlewood watched his son open the garden gate. Then he unlocked a drawer of his writing-table and took out a large sealed envelope. He broke the seal and drew from the envelope a sheaf of press cuttings. They were the verbatim reports of Stella Ballantyne's trial, which had been printed day by day in the *Times of India*. He had sent for them months ago when he had blithely taken upon himself the defence of Stella Ballantyne. He had read them with a growing ardour. So harshly had she lived; so shadowless was her innocence. He turned to them now in a different spirit. Pettifer had been left by the English summaries of the trial with a vague feeling of doubt. Mr. Hazlewood respected Robert Pettifer. The lawyer was cautious, deliberate, unemotional—qualities with which Hazlewood had instinctively little sympathy. But, on the other hand, he was not bound hand and foot in prejudice. He could be liberal in his judgments. He had a mind clear enough to divide what reason had to say and the presumptions of convention. Suppose that Pettifer was after all right! The old man's heart sank within him. Then indeed this marriage must be prevented—and the truth must be made known

—yes, widely known. He himself had been deceived —like many another man before him. It was not ridiculous to have been deceived. He remained at all events consistent to his principles. There was his pamphlet to be sure, *The Prison Walls must Cast no Shadow*: that gave him an uncomfortable twinge. But he reassured himself.

"There I argue that, once the offence has been expiated, all the privileges should be restored. But if Pettifer is right there has been no expiation."

That saving clause let him out. He did not thus phrase the position even to himself. He clothed it in other and high-sounding words. It was after all a sort of convention to accept acquittal as the proof of innocence. But at the back of his mind from first to last there was an immense fear of the figure which he himself would cut if he refused his consent to the marriage on any ground except that of Stella Ballantyne's guilt. For Stella herself, the woman, he had no kindness to spare that morning. Yesterday he had overflowed with it. For yesterday she had been one more proof to the world how high he soared above it.

"Since Pettifer's in doubt," he said to himself, "there must be some flaw in this trial which I overlooked in the heat of my sympathy;" and to discover that flaw he read again every printed detail of it from the morning when Stella first appeared before the stipendiary magistrate to that other morning a month later when the verdict was given. And he found no flaw. Stella's acquittal was inevitable on the evidence. There was

much to show what provocation she had suffered, but there was no proof that she had yielded to it. On the contrary she had endured so long, the presumption must be that she would go on enduring to the end. And there was other evidence—positive evidence given by Thresk which could not be gainsaid.

Mr. Hazlewood replaced his cuttings in the drawer; and he was utterly discontented. He had hoped for another result. There was only one point which puzzled him and that had nothing really to do with the trial, but it puzzled him so much that it slipped out at luncheon.

"Richard," he said, "I cannot understand why the name of Thresk is so familiar to me."

Dick glanced quickly at his father.

"You have been reading over again the accounts of the trial."

Mr. Hazlewood looked confused.

"And a very natural proceeding, Richard," he declared. "But while reading over the trial I found the name Thresk familiar to me in another connection, but I cannot remember what the connection is."

Dick could not help him, nor was he at that time concerned by the failure of his father's memory. He was engaged in realising that here was another enemy for Stella. Knowing his father, he was not greatly surprised, but he thought it prudent to attack without delay.

"Stella will be coming over to tea this afternoon," he said.

"Will she, Richard?" the father replied, twisting uncomfortably in his chair. "Very well—of course."

"Hubbard knows of my engagement, by the way," Dick continued implacably.

"Hubbard! God bless my soul!" cried the old man. "It'll be all over the village already."

"I shouldn't wonder," replied Dick cheerfully. "I told him before I saw you this morning, whilst I was having breakfast."

Mr. Hazlewood remained silent for a while. Then he burst out petulantly:

"Richard, there's something I must speak to you seriously about: the lateness of your hours in the morning. I have noticed it with great regret. It is not considerate to the servants and it cannot be healthy for you. Such indolence too must be enervating to your mind."

Dick forbore to remind his father that he was usually out of the house before seven.

"Father," he said, at once a very model of humility, "I will endeavour to reform."

Mr. Hazlewood concealed his embarrassment at tea-time under a show of over-work. He had a great deal to do—just a moment for a cup of tea—no more. There was to be a meeting of the County Council the next morning when a most important question of small holdings was to come up for discussion. Mr. Hazlewood held the strongest views. He was engaged in shaping them in the smallest possible number of words. To be brief, to be vivid—there was the whole

art of public speaking. Mr. Hazlewood chattered feverishly for five minutes; he had come in chattering, he went out chattering.

"That's all right, Stella, you see," said Dick cheerfully when they were left alone. Stella nodded her head. Mr. Hazlewood had not said one word in recognition of her engagement, but she had made her little fight that morning. She had yielded and she could not renew it. She had spent three miserable hours framing reasonable arguments why last night should be forgotten. But the sight of her lover coming across the meadow had set her heart so leaping that she could only stammer out a few tags and phrases.

"Oh, I wish you hadn't come!" she had repeated and repeated and all the while her blood was leaping in her body for joy that he had. She had promised in the end to stand firm, to stand by his side and brave—what, after all, but the clamour of a week? So he put it and so she was eager to believe.

Mr. Hazlewood, busy though he made himself out to be, found time that evening to drive in his motor-car into Great Beeding, and when the London train pulled up at the station he was on the platform. He looked anxiously at the passengers who descended until he saw Robert Pettifer. He went up to him at once.

"What in the world are you doing here?" asked the lawyer.

"I came on purpose to catch you, Robert. I

want to speak to you in private. My car is here. If you will get into it with me we can drive slowly towards your house."

Pettifer's face changed, but he could not refuse. Hazlewood was agitated and nervous; of his ordinary complacency there was no longer a trace. Pettifer got into the car and as it moved away from the station he asked:

"Now what's the matter?"

"I have been thinking over what you said last night, Robert. You had a vague feeling of doubt. Well, I have the verbatim reports of the trial in Bombay here in this envelope and I want you to read them carefully through and give me your opinion." He held out the envelope as he spoke, but Pettifer thrust his hands into his pockets.

"I won't touch it," he declared. "I refuse to mix myself up in the affair at all. I said more than I meant to last night."

"But you did say it, Robert."

"Then I withdraw it now."

"But you can't, Robert. You must go further. Something has happened to-day, something very serious."

"Oh!" said Pettifer.

"Yes," replied Mr. Hazlewood. "Margaret really has more insight than I credited her with. They propose to get married."

Pettifer sat upright in the car.

"You mean Dick and Stella Ballantyne?"

"Yes."

And for a little while there was silence in the car. Then Mr. Hazlewood continued to bleat.

"I never suspected anything of the kind. It places me, Robert, in a very difficult position."

"I can quite see that," answered Pettifer with a grim smile. "It's really the only consoling element in the whole business. You can't refuse your consent without looking a fool and you can't give it while you are in any doubt as to Mrs. Ballantyne's innocence."

Mr. Hazlewood was not, however, quite prepared to accept that definition of his position.

"You don't exhaust the possibilities, Robert," he said. "I can quite well refuse my consent and publicly refuse it if there are reasonable grounds for believing that there was in that trial a grave miscarriage of justice."

Mr. Pettifer looked sharply at his companion. The voice no less than the words fixed his attention. This was not the Mr. Hazlewood of yesterday. The champion had dwindled into a figure of meanness. Harold Hazlewood would be glad to discover those reasonable grounds; and he would be very much obliged if Robert Pettifer would take upon himself the responsibility of discovering them.

"Yes, I see," said Pettifer slowly. He was half inclined to leave Harold Hazlewood to find his way out of his trouble by himself. It was all his making after all. But other and wider considerations began to press upon Pettifer. He forced himself to omit altogether the subject of Hazlewood's vanities and entanglements

"Very well. Give the cuttings to me! I will read them through and I will let you know my opinion. Their intention to marry may alter everything—my point of view as much as yours."

Mr. Pettifer took the envelope in his hand and got out of the car as soon as Hazlewood had stopped it.

"You have raised no objections to the engagement?" he asked.

"A word to Richard this morning. Of not much effect I am afraid."

Mr. Pettifer nodded.

"Right. I should say nothing to anybody. You can't take a decided line against it at present and to snarl would be the worst policy imaginable. To-day's Thursday. We'll meet on Saturday. Good-night," and Robert Pettifer walked away to his own house.

He walked slowly, wondering at the eternal mystery by which this particular man and that individual woman select each other out of the throng. He owed the greater part of his fortune to the mystery like many another lawyer. But to-night he would willingly have yielded a good portion of it up if that process of selection could be ordered in a more reasonable way. Love? The attraction of Sex? Yes, no doubt. But why these two specimens of Sex? Why Dick and Stella Ballantyne?

When he reached his house his wife hurried forward to meet him. Already she had the news. There was an excitement in her face not to be

misunderstood. The futile time-honoured phrase of triumph so ready on the lips of those who have prophesied evil was trembling upon hers.

"Don't say it, Margaret," said Pettifer very seriously. "We have come to a pass where light words will lead us astray. Hazlewood has been with me. I have the reports of the trial here."

Margaret Pettifer put a check upon her tongue and they dined together almost in complete silence. Pettifer was methodically getting his own point of view quite clearly established in his mind, so that whatever he did or advised he might be certain not to swerve from it afterwards. He weighed his inclinations and his hopes, and when the servants had left the dining-room and he had lit his cigar he put his case before his wife.

"Listen, Margaret! You know your brother. He is always in extremes. He swings from one to the other. He is terrified now lest this marriage should take place."

"No wonder," interposed Mrs. Pettifer.

Pettifer made no comment upon the remark.

"Therefore," he continued, "he is anxious that I should discover in these reports some solid reason for believing that the verdict which acquitted Stella Ballantyne was a grave miscarriage of justice. For any such reason must have weight."

"Of course," said Mrs. Pettifer.

"And will justify him—this is his chief consideration—in withholding publicly his consent."

"I see."

Only a week ago Dick himself had observed that sentimental philosophers had a knack of breaking their heads against their own theories. The words had been justified sooner than she had expected. Mrs. Pettifer was not surprised at Harold Hazlewood's swift change any more than her husband had been. Harold, to her thinking, was a sentimentalist and sentimentality was like a fir-tree—a thing of no deep roots and easily torn up.

"But I do not take that view, Margaret," continued her husband, and she looked at him with consternation. Was he now to turn champion, he who only yesterday had doubted? "And I want you to consider whether you can agree with me. There is to begin with the woman herself, Stella Ballantyne. I saw her for the first time yesterday, and to be quite honest I liked her, Margaret. Yes. It seemed to me that there was nothing whatever of the adventuress about her. And I was impressed —I will go further, I was moved—dry-as-dust old lawyer as I am, by something—— How shall I express it without being ridiculous?" He paused and searched in his vocabulary and gave up the search. "No, the epithet which occurred to me yesterday at the dinner-table and immediately, still seems to me the only true one—I was moved by something in this woman of tragic experiences which was strangely virginal."

One quick movement was made by Margaret Pettifer. The truth of her husband's description was a revelation, so exact it was. Therein lay

Stella Ballantyne's charm, and her power to create champions and friends. Her history was known to you, the miseries of her marriage, the suspicion of crime. You expected a woman of adventures and lo! there stood before you one with "something virginal" in her appearance, and her manner, which made its soft and irresistible appeal.

"I recognise that feeling of mine," Pettifer resumed, "and I try to put it aside. And putting it aside I ask myself and you, Margaret, this: Here's a woman who has been through a pretty bad time, who has been unhappy, who has stood in the dock, who has been acquitted. Is it quite fair that when at last she has floated into a haven of peace two private people like Hazlewood and myself should take it upon ourselves to review the verdict and perhaps reverse it?"

"But there's Dick, Robert," cried Mrs. Pettifer. "There's Dick. Surely he's our first thought."

"Yes, there's Dick," Mr. Pettifer repeated. "And Dick's my second point. You are all worrying about Dick from the social point of view—the external point of view. Well, we have got to take that into our consideration. But we are bound to look at him, the man, as well. Don't forget that, Margaret! Well, I find the two points of view identical. But our neighbours won't. Will you?"

Mrs. Pettifer was baffled.

"I don't understand," she said.

"I'll explain. From the social standpoint

what's really important as regards Dick? That he should go out to dinner? No. That he should have children? Yes!"

And here Mrs. Pettifer interposed again.

"But they must be the right children," she exclaimed. "Better that he should have none than that he should have children——"

"With an hereditary taint," Pettifer agreed. "Admitted, Margaret. If we come to the conclusion that Stella Ballantyne did what she was accused of doing we, in spite of all the verdicts in the world, are bound to resist this marriage. I grant it. Because of that conviction I dismiss the plea that we are unfair to the woman in reviewing the trial. There are wider, greater considerations."

These were the first words of comfort which Mrs. Pettifer had heard since her husband began to expound. She received them with enthusiasm.

"I am so glad to hear that."

"Yes, Margaret," Pettifer retorted drily. "But please ask yourself this question (it is where, to my thinking, the social and the personal elements join): if this marriage is broken off, is Dick likely to marry at all?"

"Why not?" asked Margaret.

"He is thirty-four. He has had, no doubt, many opportunities of marriage. He must have had. He is good-looking, well off and a good fellow. This is the first time he has wanted to marry. If he is disappointed here will he try again?"

Mrs. Pettifer laughed, moved by the remarkable

depreciation of her own sex which women of her type so often have. It was for man to throw the handkerchief. Not a doubt but there would be a rush to pick it up!

"Widowers who have been devoted to their wives marry again," she argued.

"A point for me, Margaret!" returned Pettifer. "Widowers—yes. They miss so much—the habit of a house with a woman its mistress, the companionship, the order, oh, a thousand small but important things. But a man who has remained a bachelor until he's thirty-four—that's a different case. If he sets his heart at that age, seriously, for the first time on a woman and does not get her, that's the kind of man who, my experience suggests to me—I put it plainly, Margaret—will take one or more mistresses to himself but no wife."

Mrs. Pettifer deferred to the worldly knowledge of her husband but she clung to her one clear argument.

"Nothing could be worse," she said frankly, "than that he should marry a guilty woman."

"Granted, Margaret," replied Mr. Pettifer imperturbably. "Only suppose that she's not guilty. There are you and I, rich people, and no one to leave our money to—no one to carry on your name—no one we care a rap about to benefit by my work and your brother's fortune—no one of the family to hand over Little Beeding to."

Both of them were silent after he had spoken. He had touched upon their one great sorrow.

Margaret herself had her roots deep in the soil of Little Beeding. It was hateful to her that the treasured house should ever pass to strangers, as it would do if this the last branch of the family failed.

"But Stella Ballantyne was married for seven years," she said at last, "and there were no children."

"No, that's true," replied Pettifer. "But it does not follow that with a second marriage there will be none. It's a chance, I know, but——" and he got up from his chair. "I do honestly believe that it's the only chance you and I will have, Margaret, of dying with the knowledge that our lives have not been altogether vain. We've lighted our little torch. Yes, and it burns merrily enough, but what's the use unless at the appointed milestone there's another of us to take it and carry it on?"

He stood looking down at his wife with a wistful and serious look upon his face.

"Dick's past the age of calf-love. We can't expect him to tumble from one passion to another; and he's not easily moved. Therefore I hope very sincerely that these reports which I am now going to read will enable me to go boldly to Harold Hazlewood and say: 'Stella Ballantyne is as guiltless of this crime as you or I.'"

Mr. Pettifer took up the big envelope which he had placed on the table beside him and carried it away to his study.