

CHAPTER XIX

PETTIFER'S PLAN

ON the Saturday morning Mr. Hazlewood drove over early to Great Beeding. His impatience had so grown during the last few days that his very sleep was broken at night and in the daytime he could not keep still. The news of Dick's engagement to Stella Ballantyne was now known throughout the countryside and the blame for it was laid upon Harold Hazlewood's shoulders. For blame was the general note, blame and chagrin. A few bold and kindly spirits went at once to see Stella; a good many more seriously and at great length debated over their tea-tables whether they should call after the marriage. But on the whole the verdict was an indignant No. Disgrace was being brought upon the neighbourhood. Little Beeding would be impossible. Dick Hazlewood only laughed at the constraint of his acquaintances, and when three of them crossed the road hurriedly in Great Beeding to avoid Stella and himself he said good-humouredly:

“They are like an ill-trained company of bad soldiers. Let one of them break from the ranks and they'll all stream away so as not to be

left behind. You'll see, Stella. One of them will come and the rest will tumble over one another to get into your drawing-room."

How much he believed of what he said Stella did not inquire. She had a gift of silence. She just walked a little nearer to him and smiled, lest any should think she had noticed the slight. The one man, in a word, who showed signs of wear and tear was Mr. Hazlewood himself. So keen was his distress that he had no fear of his sister's sarcasms.

"I—think of it!" he exclaimed in a piteous bewilderment, "actually I have become sensitive to public opinion," and Mrs. Pettifer forbore from the comments which she very much longed to make. She was in the study when Harold Hazlewood was shown in, and Pettifer had bidden her to stay.

"Margaret knows that I have been reading these reports," he said. "Sit down, Hazlewood, and I'll tell you what I think."

Mr. Hazlewood took a seat facing the garden with its old red brick wall, on which a purple clematis was growing.

"You have formed an opinion then, Robert?"

"One."

"What is it?" he asked eagerly.

Robert Pettifer clapped the palm of his hand down upon the cuttings from the newspapers which lay before him on his desk.

"This—no other verdict could possibly have been given by the jury. On the evidence pro-

duced at the trial in Bombay Mrs. Ballantyne was properly and inevitably acquitted."

"Robert!" exclaimed his wife. She too had been hoping for the contrary opinion. As for Hazlewood himself the sunlight seemed to die off that garden. He drew his hand across his forehead. He half rose to go when again Robert Pettifer spoke.

"And yet," he said slowly, "I am not satisfied."

Harold Hazlewood sat down again. Mrs. Pettifer drew a breath of relief.

"The chief witness for the defence, the witness whose evidence made the acquittal certain, was a man I know—a barrister called Thresk."

"Yes," interrupted Hazlewood. "I have been puzzled about that man ever since you mentioned him before. His name I am somehow familiar with."

"I'll explain that to you in a minute," said Pettifer, and his wife leaned forward suddenly in her chair. She did not interrupt but she sat with a look of keen expectancy upon her face. She did not know whither Pettifer was leading them, but she was now sure that it was to some carefully pondered goal.

"I have more than once briefed Thresk myself. He's a man of the highest reputation at the Bar, straightforward, honest; he enjoys a great practice, he is in Parliament with a great future in Parliament. In a word he is a man with everything to lose if he lied as a witness in a trial. And yet—I am not satisfied."

Mr. Pettifer's voice sank to a low murmur. He sat at his desk staring out in front of him through the window.

"Why?" asked Hazlewood. But Pettifer did not answer him. He seemed not to hear the question. He went on in the low quiet voice he had used before, rather like one talking to himself than to a companion.

"I should very much like to put a question or two to Mr. Thresk."

"Then why don't you?" exclaimed Mrs. Pettifer. "You know him."

"Yes." Mr. Hazlewood eagerly seconded his sister. "Since you know him you are the very man."

Pettifer shook his head.

"It would be an impertinence. For although I look upon Dick as a son I am not his father. You are, Hazlewood, you are. He wouldn't answer me."

"Would he answer me?" asked Hazlewood. "I don't know him at all. I can't go to him and ask if he told the truth."

"No, no, you can't do that," Pettifer answered, "nor do I mean you to. I want to put my questions myself in my own way and I thought that you might get him down to Little Beeding."

"But I have no excuse," cried Hazlewood, and Mrs. Pettifer at last understood the plan which was in her husband's mind, which had been growing to completion since the night when he had dined at Little Beeding.

"Yes, you have an excuse," she cried, and Pettifer explained what it was.

"You collect miniatures. Some time ago you bought one of Marie Antoinette at Lord Mirliton's sale. You asked a question as to its authenticity in *Notes and Queries*. It was answered——"

Mr. Hazlewood broke in excitedly:

"By a man called Thresk. That is why the name was familiar to me. But I could not remember." He turned upon his sister. "It is your fault, Margaret. You took my copy of *Notes and Queries* away with you. Dick noticed it and told me."

"Dick!" Pettifer exclaimed in alarm. But the alarm passed. "He cannot have guessed why."

Mrs. Pettifer was clear upon the point.

"No. I took the magazine because of a remark which Robert made to you. Dick did not hear it. No, he cannot have guessed why."

"For it's important he should have no suspicion whatever of what I propose that you should do, Hazlewood," Pettifer said gravely. "I propose that we should take a lesson from the legal processes of another country. It may work, it may not, but to my mind it is our only chance."

"Let me hear!" said Hazlewood.

"Thresk is an authority on old silver and miniatures. He has a valuable collection himself. His advice is sought by people in the trade. You know what collectors are. Get him down to see your collection. It wouldn't be the first time that

you have invited a stranger to pass the night in your house for that purpose, would it ? ”

“ No.”

“ And the invitation has often been accepted ? ”

“ Well—sometimes.”

“ We must hope that it will be this time. Get Thresk down to Little Beeding upon that excuse. Then confront him unexpectedly with Mrs. Balantyne. And let me be there.”

Such was the plan which Pettifer suggested. A period of silence followed upon his words. Even Mr. Hazlewood, in the extremity of his distress, recoiled from it.

“ It would look like a trap.”

Mr. Pettifer thumped his table impatiently.

“ Let’s be frank, for Heaven’s sake. It wouldn’t merely look like a trap, it would be one. It wouldn’t be at all a pretty thing to do, but there’s this marriage ! ”

“ No, I couldn’t do it,” said Hazlewood.

“ Very well. There’s no more to be said.”

Pettifer himself had no liking for the plan. It had been his intention originally to let Hazlewood know that if he wished to get into communication with Thresk there was a means by which he could do it. But the fact of Dick’s engagement had carried him still further, and now that he had read the evidence of the trial carefully there was a real anxiety in his mind. Pettifer sealed up the cuttings in a fresh envelope and gave them to Hazlewood and went out with him to the door.

“ Of course,” said the old man, “ if your legal

experience, Robert, leads you to think that we should be justified——”

“But it doesn't,” Pettifer was quick to interpose. He recognised his brother-in-law's intention to throw the discredit of the trick upon his shoulders, but he would have none of it. “No, Hazlewood,” he said cheerfully: “it's not a plan which a high-class lawyer would be likely to commend to a client.”

“Then I am afraid that I couldn't do it.”

“All right,” said Pettifer with his hand upon the latch of the front door. “Thresk's chambers are in King's Bench Walk.” He added the number.

“I simply couldn't think of it,” Hazlewood repeated as he crossed the pavement to his car.

“Perhaps not,” said Pettifer. “You have the envelope? Yes. Choose an evening towards the end of the week, a Friday will be your best chance of getting him.”

“I will do nothing of the kind, Pettifer.”

“And let me know when he is coming. Good-bye.”

The car carried Mr. Hazlewood away still protesting that he really couldn't think of it for an instant. But he thought a good deal of it during the next week and his temper did not improve. “Pettifer has rubbed off the finer edges of his nature,” he said to himself. “It is a pity—a great pity. But thirty years of life in a lawyer's office must no doubt have that effect. I regret very much that Pettifer should have imagined that I would condescend to such a scheme.”