CHAPTER II

ON BIGNOR HILL

THEY were riding along the top of the South Downs between Singleton and Arundel, and when they came to where the old Roman road from Chichester climbs over Bignor Hill, Stella Derrick raised her hand and halted. She was then nineteen and accounted lovely by others besides Henry Thresk, who on this morning rode at her side. She was delicately yet healthfully fashioned, with blue eyes under broad brows, raven hair and a face pale and crystal-clear. But her lips were red and the colour came easily into her cheeks.

She pointed downwards to the track slanting across the turf from the brow of the hill.

"That's Stane Street. I promised to show it you."

"Yes," answered Thresk, taking his eyes slowly from her face. It was a morning rich with sunlight, noisy with blackbirds, and she seemed to him a necessary part of it. She was alive with it and gave rather than took of its gold. For not even that finely chiselled nose of hers could impart to her anything of the look of a statue.

"Yes. They went straight, didn't they, those old centurions?" he said.

He moved his horse and stood in the middle of the track, looking across a valley of forest and meadow to Halnaker Down, six miles away in the south-west. Straight in the line of his eyes over a shoulder of the down rose a tall fine spire—the spire of Chichester Cathedral, and farther on he could see the water in Bosham Creek like a silver mirror, and the Channel rippling silver beyond. He turned round. Beneath him lay the blue dark weald of Sussex, and through it he imagined the hidden line of the road driving straight as a ruler to London.

"No going about!" he said. "If a hill was in the way the road climbed over it; if a marsh it was built through it."

They rode on slowly along the great whaleback of grass, winding in and out amongst brambles and patches of yellow-flaming gorse. The day was still even at this height; and when, far away, a field of long grass under a stray wind bent from edge to edge with the swift motion of running water, it took them both by surprise. And they met no one. They seemed to ride in the morning of a new clean world. They rose higher on to Duncton Down, and then the girl spoke.

"So this is your last day here."

He gazed about him out towards the sea, eastwards to the slope down to the dark trees of Arundel, backwards over the weald to the high ridge of Blackdown.

"I shall look back upon it."

"Yes," said she. "It's a day to look back

upon." She ran over in her mind the days of this last month since he had come to the inn at Great Beeding and friends of her family had written to her parents of his coming. "It's the most perfect of all your days here. I am glad. I want you to carry back with you good memories of our Sussex."

"I shall do that," said he, "but for another reason."

Stella pushed on a foot or two ahead of him.

"Well," she said, "no doubt the Temple will be stuffy."

"Nor was I thinking of the Temple."

"No?"

"No."

She rode on a little way whilst he followed. A great bee buzzed past their heads and settled in the cup of a wild rose. In a copse beside them a thrush shot into the air a quiverful of clear melody.

Stella spoke again, not looking at her companion, and in a low voice and bravely with a sweet confusion of her blood.

"I am very glad to hear you say that, for I was afraid that I had let you see more than I should have cared for you to see—unless you had been anxious to see it too."

She waited for an answer, still keeping her distance just a foot or two ahead, and the answer did not come. A vague terror began to possess her that things which could never possibly be were actually happening to her. She spoke again with a tremor in her voice and all the confidence gone

out of it. Almost it appealed that she should not be put to shame before herself.

"It would have been a little humiliating to remember, if that had been true."

Then upon the ground she saw the shadow of Thresk's horse creep up until the two rode side by side. She looked at him quickly with a doubtful wavering smile and looked down again. What did all the trouble in his face portend? Her heart thumped and she heard him say:

"Stella, I have something very difficult to say to you."

He laid a hand gently upon her arm, but she wrenched herself free. Shame was upon her—shame unendurable. She tingled with it from head to foot. She turned to him suddenly a face grown crimson and eyes which brimmed with tears.

"Oh," she cried aloud, "that I should have been such a fool!" and she swayed forward in her saddle. But before he could reach out an arm to hold her she was upright again, and with a cut of her whip she was off at a gallop.

"Stella," he cried, but she only used her whip the more. She galloped madly and blindly over the grass, not knowing whither, not caring, loathing herself. Thresk galloped after her, but her horse, maddened by her whip and the thud of the hoofs behind, held its advantage. He settled down to the pursuit with a jumble of thoughts in his brain.

"If to-day were only ten years on. . . . As it is it would be madness . . . madness and squalor

and the end of everything. . . . Between us we haven't a couple of pennies to rub together. . . . How she rides! . . . She was never meant for Brixton. . . . No, nor I. . . . Why didn't I hold my tongue? . . . Oh what a fool, what a fool! Thank Heaven the horses come out of a livery stable. . . . They can't go on for ever and—oh, my God! there are rabbit-holes on the Downs." And his voice rose to a shout: "Stella! Stella!"

But she never looked over her shoulder. She fled the more desperately, shamed through and through! Along the high ridge, between the bushes and the beech-trees, their shadows flitted over the turf, to a jingle of bits and the thunder of hoofs. Duncton Beacon rose far behind them; they had crossed the road and Charlton forest was slipping past like dark water before the mad race came to an end. Stella became aware that escape was impossible. Her horse was spent, she herself reeling. She let her reins drop loose and the gallop changed to a trot, the trot to a walk. She noticed with gratitude that Thresk was giving her time. He too had fallen to a walk behind her, and quite slowly he came to her side. She turned to him at once.

"This is good country for a gallop, isn't it?"

"Rabbit-holes though," said he. "You were lucky."

He answered absently. There was something which had got to be said now. He could not let this girl to whom he owed—well, the only holiday that he had ever taken, go home shamed by a mis-

take, which after all she had not made. He was very near indeed to saying yet more. The inclination was strong in him, but not so strong as the methods of his life. Marriage now—that meant to his view the closing of all the avenues of advancement, and a life for both below both their needs.

"Stella, just listen to me. I want you to know that had things been different I should have rejoiced beyond words."

"Oh, don't!" she cried.

"I must," he answered and she was silent. "I want you to know," he repeated, stammering and stumbling, afraid lest each word meant to heal should only pierce the deeper. "Before I came here there was no one. Since I came here there has been—you. Oh, my dear, I would have been very glad. But I am obscure—without means. There are years in front of me before I shall be anything else. I couldn't ask you to share them—or I should have done so before now."

In her mind ran the thought: what queer unimportant things men think about! The early years! Wouldn't their difficulties, their sorrows be the real savour of life and make it worth remembrance, worth treasuring? But men had the right of speech. Not again would she forget that. She bowed her head and he blundered on.

"For you there'll be a better destiny. There's that great house in the Park with its burnt walls. I should like to see that rebuilt and you in your right place, its mistress." And his words ceased as Stella abruptly turned to him. She was breathing

quickly and she looked at him with a wonder in her trouble.

"And it hurts you to say this!" she said. "Yes, it actually hurts you."

"What else could I say?"

Her face softened as she looked and heard. It was not that he was cold of blood or did not care. There was more than discomfort in his voice, there was a very real distress. And in his eyes his heart ached for her to see. Something of her pride was restored to her. She fell at once to his tune, but she was conscious that both of them talked treacheries.

"Yes, you are right. It wouldn't have been possible. You have your name and your fortune to make. I too—I shall marry, I suppose, some one"—and she suddenly smiled rather bitterly—"who will give me a Rolls-Royce motor-car." And so they rode on very reasonably.

Noon had passed. A hush had fallen upon that high world of grass and sunlight. The birds were still. They talked of this and that, the latest crisis in Europe and the growth of Socialism, all very wisely and with great indifference like well-bred people at a dinner-party. Not thus had Stella thought to ride home when the message had come that morning that the horses would be at her door before ten. She had ridden out clothed on with dreams of gold. She rode back with her dreams in tatters and a sort of incredulity that to her too, as to other girls, all this pain had come.

They came to a bridle-path which led down-

wards through a thicket of trees to the weald and so descended upon Great Beeding. They rode through the little town, past the inn where Thresk was staying and the iron gates of a Park where, amidst elm-trees, the blackened ruins of a great house gaped to the sky.

"Some day you will 'live there again," said Thresk, and Stella's lips twitched with a smile of humour.

"I shall be very glad after to-day to leave the house I am living in," she said quietly, and the words struck him dumb. He had subtlety enough to understand her. The rooms would mock her with memories of vain dreams. Yet he kept silence. It was too late in any case to take back what he had said; and even if she would listen to him marriage wouldn't be fair. He would be hampered, and that, just at this time in his life, would mean failure—failure for her no less than for him. They must be prudent—prudent and methodical, and so the great prizes would be theirs.

A mile beyond, a mile of yellow lanes between high hedges, they came to the village of Little Beeding, one big house and a few thatched cottages clustered amongst roses and great trees on the bank of a small river. Thither old Mr. Derrick and his wife and his daughter had gone after the fire at Hinksey Park had completed the ruin which disastrous speculations had begun; and at the gate of one of the cottages the riders stopped and dismounted.

"I shall not see you again after to-day," said Stella. "Will you come in for a moment?"

Thresk gave the horses to a passing labourer to hold and opened the gate.

"I shall be disturbing your people at their luncheon," he said.

"I don't want you to go in to them," said the girl. "I will say good-bye to them for you."

Thresk followed her up the garden-path, wondering what it was that she had still to say to him. She led him into a small room at the back of the house, looking out upon the lawn. Then she stood in front of him.

"Will you kiss me once, please," she said simply, and she stood with her arms hanging at her side, whilst he kissed her on the lips.

"Thank you," she said. "Now will you go?"

He left her standing in the little room and led the horses back to the inn. That afternoon he took the train to London.