

## CHAPTER XX

### ON THE DOWNS

THEY went up by the steep chalk road which skirts the park wall to the top of the conical hill above the race-course. An escarpment of grass banks guards a hollow like a shallow crater on the very summit. They rode round it upon the rim, now facing the black slope of Charlton Forest across the valley to the north, now looking out over the plain and Chichester. Thirty miles away above the sea the chalk cliffs of the Isle of Wight gleamed under their thatch of dark turf. It was not yet nine in the morning. Later the day would climb dustily to noon; now it had the wonder and the stillness of great beginnings. A faint haze like a veil at the edges of the sky and a freshness of the air made the world magical to these two who rode high above weald and sea. Stella looked downwards to the silver flash of the broad water west of Chichester spire.

“That way they came, perhaps on a day like this,” she said slowly, “those old centurions.”

“Your thoughts go back,” said Dick Hazlewood with a laugh.

“Not so far as you think,” cried Stella, and

suddenly her cheeks took fire and a smile dimpled them. "Oh, I dare to think of many things to-day."

She rode down the steep grass slope towards the race-course with Dick at her side. It was the first morning they had ridden together since the night of the dinner-party at Little Beeding. Mr. Hazlewood was at this moment ordering his car so that he might drive in to the town and learn what Pettifer had discovered in the cuttings from the newspapers. But they were quite unaware of the plot which was being hatched against them. They went forward under the high beech-trees watching for the great roots which stretched across their path, and talking little. An open way between wooden posts led them now on to turf and gave them the freedom of the downs. They saw no one. With the larks and the field-fares they had the world to themselves; and in the shade beneath the hedges the dew still sparkled on the grass. They left the long arm of Halnaker Down upon their right, its old mill standing up on the edge like some lighthouse on a bluff of the sea, and crossing the high road from Up-Waltham rode along a narrow glade amongst beeches and nut-trees and small oaks and bushes of wild roses. Open spaces came again; below them were the woods and the green country of Slindon and the deep grass of Dale Park. And so they drew near to Gumber Corner where Stane Street climbs over Bignor Hill. Here Dick Hazlewood halted.

"I suppose we turn."

"Not to-day," said Stella, and Dick turned to her with surprise. Always before they had stopped at this point and always by Stella's wish. Either she was tired or was needed at home or had letters to write—always there had been some excuse and no reason. Dick Hazlewood had come to believe that she would not pass this point, that the down land beyond was a sort of Tom Tiddler's ground on which she would not trespass. He had wondered why, but his instinct had warned him from questions. He had always turned at this spot immediately, as if he believed the excuse which she had ready.

Stella noticed the surprise upon his face; and the blushes rose again in her cheeks.

"You knew that I would not go beyond," she said.

"Yes."

"But you did not know why?" There was a note of urgency in her voice.

"I guessed," he said. "I mean I played with guesses—oh not seriously," and he laughed. "There runs Stane Street from Chichester to London and through London to the great North Wall. Up that road the Romans marched and back by that road they returned to their galleys in the water there by Chichester. I pictured you living in those days, a Boadicea of the Weald who had set her heart, against her will, on some dashing captain of old Rome camped here on the top of Bignor Hill. You crept from your own people at night to meet him in the lane at the bottom. Then

came week after week when the street rang with the tramp of soldiers returning from London and Lichfield and the North to embark in their boats for Gaul and Rome."

"They took my captain with them?" cried Stella, laughing with him at the conceit.

"Yes, so my fable ran. He pined for the circus and the theatre and the painted ladies, so he went willingly."

"The brute," cried Stella. "And so I broke my heart over a decadent philanderer in a suit of bright brass clothes and remember it thirteen hundred years afterwards in another life! Thank you, Captain Hazlewood!"

"No, you don't actually remember it, Stella, but you have a feeling that round about Stane Street you once suffered great humiliation and unhappiness." And suddenly Stella rode swiftly past him, but in a moment she waited for him and showed him a face of smiles.

"You see I have crossed Stane Street to-day, Dick," she said. "We'll ride on to Arundel."

"Yes," answered Dick, "my story won't do," and he remembered a sentence of hers spoken an hour and a half ago: "My thoughts do not go back as far as you think."

At all events she was emancipated to-day, for they rode on until at the end of a long gentle slope the great arch of the gate into Arundel Park gleamed white in a line of tall dark trees.