

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE LETTER IS WRITTEN

BUT Stella's confidence did not live long. Mr. Hazlewood was a child at deceptions; and day by day his anxieties increased. His friends argued with him—his folly and weakness were the themes—and he must needs repel the argument though his thoughts echoed every word they used. Never was a man brought to such a piteous depth of misery by the practice of his own theories. He sat by the hour at his desk, burying his face amongst his papers if Dick came into the room, with a great show of occupation. He could hardly bear to contemplate the marriage of his son, yet day and night he must think of it and search for expedients which might put an end to the trouble and let him walk free again with his head raised high. But there were only the two expedients. He must speak out his fears that justice had miscarried, and that device his vanity forbade; or he must adopt Pettifer's suggestion, and from that he shrank almost as much. He began to resent the presence of Stella Ballantyne and he showed it. Sometimes a friendliness, so excessive

that it was almost hysterical, betrayed him; more usually a discomfort and constraint. He avoided her if by any means he could; if he could not quite avoid her an excuse of business was always on his lips.

"Your father hates me, Dick," she said. "He was my friend until I touched his own life. Then I was in the black books in a second."

Dick would not hear of it.

"You were never in the black books at all, Stella," he said, comforting her as well as he could. "We knew that there would be a little struggle, didn't we? But the worst of that's over. You make friends daily."

"Not with your father, Dick. I go back with him. Ever since that night—it's three weeks ago now—when you took me home from Little Beeding."

"No," cried Dick, but Stella nodded her head gloomily.

"Mr. Pettifer dined here that night. He's an enemy of mine."

"Stella," young Hazlewood remonstrated, "you see enemies everywhere," and upon that Stella broke out with a quivering troubled face.

"Is it wonderful? Oh, Dick, I couldn't lose you! A month ago—before that night—yes. Nothing had been said. But now! I couldn't, I couldn't! I have often thought it would be better for me to go right away and never see you again. And—and I have tried to tell you something, Dick, ever so many times."

"Yes?" said Dick. He slipped his arm through hers and held her close to him, as though to give her courage and security. "Yes, Stella?" and he stood very still.

"I mean," she said, looking down upon the ground, "that I have tried to tell you that I wouldn't suffer so very much if we did part, but I never could do it. My lips shook so, I never could speak the words." Then her voice ran up into a laugh. "To think of your living in a house with somebody else! Oh no!"

"You need have no fear of that, Stella."

They were in the garden of Little Beeding and they walked across the meadow towards her cottage, talking very earnestly. Mr. Hazlewood was watching them secretly from the window of the library. He saw that Dick was pleading and she hanging in doubt; and a great wave of anger surged over him that Dick should have to plead to her at all, he who was giving everything—even his own future.

"King's Bench Walk," he muttered to himself, taking from the drawer of his writing-table a slip of paper on which he had written the address lest he should forget it. "Yes, that's the address," and he looked at it for a long time very doubtfully. Suppose that his suspicions were correct! His heart sank at the supposition. Surely he would be justified in setting any trap. But he shut the drawer violently and turned away from his writing-table. Even his pamphlets had become trivial in his eyes. He was brought face

to face with real passions and real facts, he had been fetched out from his cloister and was blinking miserably in a full measure of daylight. How long could he endure it, he wondered ?

The question was settled for him that very evening. He and his son were taking their coffee on a paved terrace by the lawn after dinner. It was a dark quiet night, with a clear sky of golden stars. Across the meadow the lights shone in the windows of Stella's cottage.

"Father," said Dick, after they had sat in a constrained silence for a little while, "why don't you like Stella any longer ?"

The old man blustered in reply :

"A lawyer's question, Richard. I object to it very strongly. You assume that I have ceased to like her."

"It's extremely evident," said Dick drily. "Stella has noticed it."

"And complained to you of course," cried Mr. Hazlewood resentfully.

"Stella doesn't complain," and then Dick leaned over and spoke in the full quiet voice which his father had grown to dread. There rang in it so much of true feeling and resolution.

"There can be no backing down now. We are both agreed upon that, aren't we ? Imagine for an instant that I were first to blazon my trust in a woman whom others suspected by becoming engaged to her and then endorsed their suspicions by breaking off the engagement ! Suppose that I were to do that !"

Mr. Hazlewood allowed his longings to lead him astray. For a moment he hoped.

"Well?" he asked eagerly.

"You wouldn't think very much of me, would you? Not you nor any man. A cur—that would be the word, the only word, wouldn't it?"

But Mr. Hazlewood refused to answer that question. He looked behind him to make sure that none of the servants were within hearing. Then he lowered his voice to a whisper.

"What if Stella has deceived you, Dick?"

It was too dark for him to see the smile upon his son's face, but he heard the reply, and the confidence of it stung him to exasperation.

"She hasn't done that," said Dick. "If you are sure of nothing else, sir, you may be quite certain of what I am telling you now. She hasn't done that."

He remained silent for a few moments waiting for any rejoinder, and getting none he continued:

"There's something else I wanted to speak to you about."

"Yes?"

"The date of our marriage."

The old man moved sharply in his chair.

"There's no hurry, Richard. You must find out how it will affect your career. You have been so long at Little Beeding where we hear very little from the outer world. You must consult your Colonel."

Dick Hazlewood would not listen to the argument.

“ My marriage is my affair, sir, not my Colonel’s. I cannot take advice, for we both of us know what it would be. And we both of us value it at its proper price, don’t we ? ”

Mr. Hazlewood could not reply. How often had he inveighed against the opinions of the sleek worldly people who would add up advantages in a column and leave out of their consideration the merits of the higher life.

“ It would not be fair to Stella were we to ask her to wait,” Dick resumed. “ Any delay—think what will be made of it ! A month or six weeks from now, that gives us time enough.”

The old man rose abruptly from his chair with a vague word that he would think of it and went into the house. He saw again the lovers as he had seen them this afternoon walking side by side slowly towards Stella Ballantyne’s cottage ; and the picture even in the retrospect was intolerable. The marriage must not take place—yet it was so near. A month or six weeks ! Mr. Hazlewood took up his pen and wrote the letter to Henry Thresk at last, as Robert Pettifer had always been sure that he would do. It was the simplest kind of letter and took but a minute in the writing. It mentioned only his miniatures and invited Henry Thresk to Little Beeding to see them, as more than one stranger had been asked before. The answers which Thresk had given to the questions in *Notes and Queries* were pleaded as an introduction and Thresk was invited to choose his own day and remain at Little Beeding for the night.

The reply came by return of post. Thresk would come to Little Beeding on the Friday afternoon of the next week. He was in town, for Parliament was sitting late that year. He would reach Little Beeding soon after five so that he might have an opportunity of seeing the miniatures by daylight. Mr. Hazlewood hurried over with the news to Robert Pettifer. His spirits had risen at a bound. Already he saw the neighbourhood freed from the disturbing presence of Stella Ballantyne and himself cheerfully resuming his multifarious occupations.

Robert Pettifer, however, spoke in quite another strain.

"I am not so sure as you, Hazlewood. The points which trouble me are very possibly capable of quite simple explanations. I hope for my part that they will be so explained."

"You hope it?" cried Mr. Hazlewood.

"Yes. I want Dick to marry," said Robert Pettifer.

Mr. Hazlewood was not, however, to be discouraged. He drove back to his house counting the days which must pass before Thresk's arrival and wondering how he should manage to conceal his elation from the keen eyes of his son. But he found that there was no need for him to trouble himself on that point, for this very morning at luncheon Dick said to him:

"I think that I'll run up to town this afternoon, father. I might be there for a day or two."

Mr. Hazlewood was delighted. No other pro-

posal could have fitted in so well with his scheme. The mere fact that Dick was away would start people at the pleasant business of conjecturing mishaps and quarrels. Perhaps indeed the lovers *had* quarrelled. Perhaps Richard had taken his advice and was off to consult his superiors. Mr. Hazlewood scanned his son's face eagerly but learnt nothing from it; and he was too wary to ask any questions.

"By all means, Richard," he said carelessly, "go to London! You will be back by next Friday, I suppose."

"Oh yes, before that. I shall stay at my own rooms, so if you want me you can send me a telegram."

Dick Hazlewood had a small flat of his own in some Mansions at Westminster which had seen very little of him that summer.

"Thank you, Richard," said the old man. "But I shall get on very well, and a few days change will no doubt do you good."

Dick grinned at his father and went off that afternoon without a word of farewell to Stella Ballantyne. Mr. Hazlewood stood in the hall and saw him go with a great relief at his heart. Everything at last seemed to be working out to advantage. He could not but remember how so very few weeks ago he had been urgent that Richard should spend his summer at Little Beeding and lend a hand in the noble work of defending Stella Ballantyne against ignorance and unreason. But the twinge only lasted a moment. He had made a mistake,



as all men occasionally do—yes, even sagacious and thoughtful people like himself. And the mistake was already being repaired. He looked across the meadow that night at the lighted blinds of Stella's windows and anticipated an evening when those windows would be dark and the cottage without an inhabitant.

“Very soon,” he murmured to himself, “very soon.” He had not one single throb of pity for her now, not a single speculation whither she would go or what she would make of her life. His own defence of her had now become a fault of hers. He wished her no harm, he argued, but in a week's time there must be no light shining behind those blinds.