

CHAPTER XXII

A WAY OUT OF THE TRAP

MR. HAZLEWOOD was very glad that Richard was away in London during this week. Excitement kept him feverish and the fever grew as the number of days before Thresk was to come diminished. He would never have been able to keep his secret had every meal placed him under his son's eyes. He was free too from Stella herself. He met her but once on the Monday and then it was in the deep lane leading towards the town. It was about five o'clock in the evening and she was driving homewards in an open fly. Mr. Hazlewood stopped it and went to the side.

"Richard is away, Stella, until Wednesday, as no doubt you knew," he said. "But I want you to come over to tea when he comes back. Will Friday suit you?"

She had looked a little frightened when Mr. Hazlewood had called to the driver and stopped the carriage; but at his words the blood rushed into her cheeks and her eyes shone and she pushed out her hand impulsively.

"Oh, thank you," she cried. "Of course I will come."

Not for a long time had he spoken to her with so kind a voice and a face so unclouded. She rejoiced at the change in him and showed him such gratitude as is given only to those who render great service, so intense was her longing not to estrange Dick from his father.

But she had become a shrewd observer under the stress of her evil destiny; and the moment of rejoicing once past she began to wonder what had brought about the change. She judged Mr. Hazlewood to be one of those weak and effervescing characters who can grow more obstinate in resentment than any others if their pride and self-esteem receive an injury. She had followed of late the windings of his thoughts. She put the result frankly to herself.

“He hates me. He holds me in horror.”

Why then the sudden change? She was in the mood to start at shadows and when a little note was brought over to her on the Friday morning in Mr. Hazlewood's handwriting reminding her of her engagement she was filled with a vague apprehension. The note was kindly in its terms, yet to her it had a menacing and sinister look. Had some stroke been planned against her? Was it to be delivered this afternoon?

Dick came at half-past four from a village cricket match to fetch her.

“You are ready, Stella? Right! For we can't spare very much time. I have a surprise for you.”

Stella asked him what it was and he answered:

"There's a house for sale in Great Beeding. I think that you would like it."

Stella's face softened with a smile.

"Anywhere, Dick," she said, "anywhere on earth."

"But here best of all," he answered. "Not to run away—that's our policy. We'll make our home in our own south country. I arranged to take you over the house between half-past five and six this evening."

They walked across to Little Beeding and were made welcome by Mr. Hazlewood. He came out to meet them in the garden and nervousness made him kittenish and arch.

"How are you, Stella?" he inquired. "But there's no need to ask. You look charming and upon my word you grow younger every day. What a pretty hat! Yes, yes! Will you make tea while I telephone to the Pettifers? They seem to be late."

He skipped off with an alacrity which was rather ridiculous. But Stella watched him go without any amusement.

"I am taken again into favour," she said doubtfully.

"That shouldn't distress you, Stella," replied Dick.

"Yet it does, for I ask myself why. And I don't understand this tea-party. Mr. Hazlewood was so urgent that I should not forget it. Perhaps, however, I am inventing trouble."

She shook herself free from her apprehensions

and followed Dick into the drawing-room, where the kettle was boiling and the tea-service spread out. Stella went to the table and opened the little mahogany caddy.

"How many are coming, Dick?" she asked.

"The Pettifers."

"My enemies," said Stella, laughing lightly.

"And you and my father and myself."

"Five altogether," said Stella. She began to measure out the tea into the tea-pot but stopped suddenly in the middle of her work.

"But there are six cups," she said. She counted them again to make sure, and at once her fears were reawakened. She turned to Dick, her face quite pale and her big eyes dark with forebodings. So little now was needed to disquiet her. "Who is the sixth?"

Dick came closer to her and put his arm about her waist.

"I don't know," he said gently; "but what can it matter to us, Stella. Think, my dear!"

"No, of course," she replied, "it can't make any difference," and she dipped her teaspoon once more into the caddy. "But it's a little curious, isn't it?—that your father didn't mention to you that there was another guest?"

"Oh, wait a moment," said Dick. "He did tell me there would be some visitor here to-day, but I forgot all about it. He told me at luncheon. There's a man from London coming down to have a look at his miniatures."

"His miniatures?" Stella was pouring the hot

water into the tea-pot. She replaced the kettle on its stand and shut the tea-caddy. "And Mr. Hazlewood didn't tell you the man's name," she said.

"I didn't ask him," answered Dick. "He often has collectors down."

"I see." Her head was bent over the tea-table; she was busy with her brew of tea. "And I was specially asked to come this afternoon. I had a note this morning to remind me." She looked at the clock. "Dick, if we are to see that house this afternoon you had better change now before the visitors come."

"That's true. I will."

Dick started towards the door, and he heard Stella come swiftly after him. He turned. There was so much trouble in her face. He caught her in his arms.

"Dick," she whispered, "look at me. Kiss me! Yes, I am sure of you," and she clung to him. Dick Hazlewood laughed.

"I think we ought to be fairly happy in that house," and she let him go with a smile, repeating her own words, "Anywhere, Dick, anywhere on earth."

She waited, watching him tenderly until the door was closed. Then she covered her face with her hands and a sob burst from her lips. But the next moment she tore her hands away and looked wildly about the room. She ran to the writing-table and scribbled a note; she thrust it into an envelope and gummed the flap securely down

Then she rang the bell and waited impatiently with a leaping heart until Hubbard came to the door.

"Did you ring, madam?" he asked.

"Yes. Has Mr. Thresk arrived yet?"

She tried to control her face, to speak in a careless and indifferent voice, but she was giddy and the room whirled before her eyes.

"Yes, madam," the butler answered; and it seemed to Stella Ballantyne that once more she stood in the dock and heard the verdict spoken. Only this time it had gone against her. That queer old shuffling butler became a figure of doom, his thin and piping voice uttered her condemnation. For here without her knowledge was Henry Thresk and she was bidden to meet him with the Pettifers for witnesses. But it was Henry Thresk who had saved her before. She clung to that fact now.

"Mr. Thresk arrived a few minutes ago."

Just before old Hazlewood had come forward out of the house to welcome her! No wonder he was in such high spirits! Very likely all that great show of kindness and welcome was made only to keep her in the garden for a few necessary moments.

"Where is Mr. Thresk now?" she asked.

"In his room, madam."

"You are quite sure?"

"Quite."

"Will you take this note to him, Hubbard?" and she held it out to the butler.

“Certainly, madam.”

“Will you take it at once? Give it into his hands please.”

Hubbard took the note and went out of the room. Never had he seemed to her so dilatory and slow. She stared at the door as though her sight could pierce the panels. She imagined him climbing the stairs with feet which loitered more at each fresh step. Some one would surely stop him and ask for whom the letter was intended. She went to the door which led into the hall, opened it and listened. No one was descending the staircase and she heard no voices. Then above her Hubbard knocked upon a door, a latch clicked as the door was opened, a hollow jarring sound followed as the door was sharply closed. Stella went back into the room. The letter had been delivered; at this moment Henry Thresk was reading it; and with a sinking heart she began to speculate in what spirit he would receive its message. Henry Thresk! The unhappy woman bestirred herself to remember him. He had grown dim to her of late. How much did she know of him? she asked herself. Once years ago there had been a month during which she had met him daily. She had given her heart to him, yet she had learned little or nothing of the man within the man's frame. She had not even made his acquaintance. That had been proved to her one memorable morning upon the top of Bignor Hill, when humiliation had so deeply seared her soul that only during this last month had it been healed. In the great

extremities of her life Henry Thresk had decided, not she, and he was a stranger to her. She beat her poor wings in vain against that ironic fact. Never had he done what she had expected. On Bignor Hill, in the Law Court at Bombay, he had equally surprised her. Now once more he held her destinies in his hand. What would he decide? What had he decided?

"Yes, he will have decided now," said Stella to herself; and a certain calm fell upon her troubled soul. Whatever was to be was now determined. She went back to the tea-table and waited.

Henry Thresk had not much of the romantic in his character. He was a busy man making the best and the most of the rewards which the years brought to him, and slamming the door each day upon the day which had gone before. He made his life in the intellectual exercise of his profession and his membership of the House of Commons. Upon the deeps of the emotions he had closed a lid. Yet he had set out with a vague reluctance to Little Beeding; and once his motor-car had passed Hindhead and dipped to the weald of Sussex the reluctance had grown to a definite regret that he should once more have come into this country. His recollections were of a dim far-off time, so dim that he could hardly believe that he had any very close relation with the young struggling man who had spent his first real holiday there. But the young man had been himself and he had missed his opportunity high up on the downs by Arundel. Words which Jane Pepton

had spoken to him in Bombay came back to him on this summer afternoon like a refrain to the steady hum of his car. "You can get what you want, so long as you want it enough, but you cannot control the price you will have to pay."

He had reached Little Beeding only a few moments before Dick and Stella had crossed into the garden. He had been led by Hubbard into the library, where Mr. Hazlewood was sitting. From the windows he had even seen the thatched cottage where Stella Ballantyne dwelt and its tiny garden bright with flowers.

"It is most kind of you to come," Mr. Hazlewood had said. "Ever since we had our little correspondence I have been anxious to take your opinion on my collection. Though how in the world you manage to find time to have an opinion at all upon the subject is most perplexing. I never open the *Times* but I see your name figuring in some important case."

"And I, Mr. Hazlewood," Thresk replied with a smile, "never open my mail without receiving a pamphlet from you. I am not the only active man in the world."

Even at that moment Mr. Hazlewood flushed with pleasure at the flattery.

"Little reflections," he cried with a modest deprecation, "worked out more or less to completeness—may I say that?—in the quiet of a rural life, sparks from the tiny flame of my midnight oil." He picked up one pamphlet from a

stack by his writing-table. "You might perhaps care to look at *The Prison Walls*."

Thresk drew back.

"I have got mine, Mr. Hazlewood," he said firmly. "Every man in England should have one. No man in England has a right to two."

Mr. Hazlewood fairly twittered with satisfaction. Here was a notable man from the outside world of affairs who knew his work and held it in esteem. Obviously then he was right to take these few disagreeable twists and turns which would ensure to him a mind free to pursue his labours. He looked down at the pamphlet however, and his satisfaction was a trifle impaired.

"I am not sure that this is quite my best work," he said timidly—"a little hazardous perhaps."

"Would you say that?" asked Thresk.

"Yes, indeed I should." Mr. Hazlewood had the air of one making a considerable concession. "The very title is inaccurate. *The Prison Walls must Cast no Shadows*." He repeated the sentence with a certain unction. "The rhythm is perhaps not amiss, but the metaphor is untrue. My son pointed it out to me. As he says, all walls cast shadows."

"Yes," said Thresk. "The trouble is to know where and on whom the shadow is going to fall."

Mr. Hazlewood was startled by the careless words. He came to earth heavily. All was not as yet quite ready for the little trick which had been devised. The Pettifers had not arrived.

"Perhaps you would like to see your room, Mr. Thresk," he said. "Your bag has been taken up, no doubt. We will look at my miniatures after tea."

"I shall be delighted," said Thresk as he followed Hazlewood to the door. "But you must not expect too much knowledge from me."

"Oh!" cried his host with a laugh. "Pettifer tells me that you are a great authority."

"Then Pettifer's wrong," said Thresk and so stopped. "Pettifer? Pettifer? Isn't he a solicitor?"

"Yes, he told me that he knew you. He married my sister. They are both coming to tea."

With that he led Thresk to his room and left him there. The room was over the porch of the house and looked down the short level drive to the iron gates and the lane. It was all familiar ground to Thresk or rather to that other man with whom Thresk's only connection was a dull throb at his heart, a queer uneasiness and discomfort. He leaned out of the window. He could hear the river singing between the grass banks at the bottom of the garden behind him. He would hear it through the night. Then came a knocking upon his door, and he did not notice it at once. It was repeated and he turned and said:

"Come in!"

Hubbard advanced with a note upon a salver.

"Mrs. Ballantyne asked me to give you this at once, sir."

Thresk stared at the Lutler. The name was so

apposite to his thoughts that he could not believe it had been uttered. But the salver was held out to him and the handwriting upon the envelope removed his doubts. He took it up, said "Thank you" in an absent voice and waited until the door was closed again and he was alone. The last time he had seen that writing was eighteen months ago. A little note of thanks, blurred with tears and scribbled hastily and marked with no address, had been handed to him in Bombay. Stella Ballantyne had disappeared then. She was here now at Little Beeding and his relationship with the young struggling barrister of ten years back suddenly became actual and near. He tore open the envelope and read.

"Be prepared to see me. Be prepared to hear news of me. I will have a talk with you afterwards if you like. This is a trap. Be kind."

He stood for a while with the letter in his hand, speculating upon its meaning, until the wheels of a car grated on the gravel beneath his window. The Pettifers had come. But Thresk was in no hurry to descend. He read the note through many times before he hid it away in his letter-case and went down the stairs.