

## CHAPTER XXIII

### METHODS FROM FRANCE

MEANWHILE Stella Ballantyne waited below. She heard Mr. Hazlewood in the hall greeting the Pettifers with the false joviality which sat so ill upon him ; she imagined the shy nods and glances which told them that the trap was properly set. Mr. Hazlewood led them into the room.

“ Is tea ready, Stella ? We won't wait for Dick,” he said, and Stella took her place at the table. She had her back to the door by which Thresk would enter. She had not a doubt that thus her chair had been deliberately placed. He would be in the room and near to the table before he saw her. He would not have a moment to prepare himself against the surprise of her presence. Stella listened for the sound of his footsteps in the hall ; she could not think of a single topic to talk about except the presence of that extra sixth cup ; and that she must not mention if the tables were really to be turned upon her antagonists. Surprise must be visible upon her side when Thresk did come in. But she was not alone in finding conversation difficult. Embarrassment and expectancy weighed down the whole party, so that they began suddenly

to speak at once and simultaneously to stop. Robert Pettifer however asked if Dick was playing cricket, and so gave Harold Hazlewood an opportunity.

"No, the match was over early," said the old man, and he settled himself in his arm-chair. "I have given some study to the subject of cricket," he said.

"You?" asked Stella with a smile of surprise. Was he merely playing for time, she wondered? But he had the air of contentment with which he usually embarked upon his disquisitions.

"Yes. I do not consider our national pastime beneath a philosopher's attention. I have formed two theories about the game."

"I am sure you have," Robert Pettifer interposed.

"And I have invented two improvements, though I admit at once that they will have to wait until a more enlightened age than ours adopts them. In the first place"—and Mr. Hazlewood flourished a forefinger in the air—"the game ought to be played with a soft ball. There is at present a suggestion of violence about it which the use of a soft ball would entirely remove."

"Entirely," Mr. Pettifer agreed and his wife exclaimed impatiently:

"Rubbish, Harold, rubbish!"

Stella broke nervously into the conversation.

"Violence? Why even women play cricket, Mr. Hazlewood."

"I cannot, Stella," he returned, "accept the

view that whatever women do must necessarily be right. There are instances to the contrary."

"Yes. I come across a few of them in my office," Robert Pettifer said grimly; and once more embarrassment threatened to descend upon the party. But Mr. Hazlewood was off upon a favourite theme. His eyes glistened and the object of the gathering vanished for the moment from his thoughts.

"And in the second place," he resumed, "the losers should be accounted to have won the game."

"Yes, that must be right," said Pettifer. "Upon my word you are in form, Hazlewood."

"But why?" asked Mrs. Pettifer.

Harold Hazlewood smiled upon her as upon a child and explained:

"Because by adopting that system you would do something to eradicate the spirit of rivalry, the desire to win, the ambition to beat somebody else which is the bottom of half our national troubles."

"And all our national success," said Pettifer.

Hazlewood patted his brother-in-law upon the shoulder. He looked at him indulgently. "You are a Tory, Robert," he said, and implied that argument with such an one was mere futility.

He had still his hand upon Pettifer's shoulder when the door opened. Stella saw by the change in his face that it was Thresh who was entering. But she did not move.

"Ah," said Mr. Hazlewood. "Come over here and take a cup of tea."

Thresk came forward to the table. He seemed altogether unconscious that the eyes of the two men were upon him.

"Thank you. I should like one," he said, and at the sound of his voice Stella Ballantyne turned around in her chair.

"You!" she cried and the cry was pitched in a tone of pleasure and welcome.

"Of course you know Mrs. Ballantyne," said Hazlewood. He saw Stella rise from her chair and hold out her hand to Thresk with the colour aflame in her cheeks.

"You are surprised to see me again," she said.

Thresk took her hand cordially. "I am delighted to see you again," he replied.

"And I to see you," said Stella, "for I have never yet had a chance of thanking you;" and she spoke with so much frankness that even Pettifer was shaken in his suspicions. She turned upon Mr. Hazlewood with a mimicry of indignation. "Do you know, Mr. Hazlewood, that you have done a very cruel thing?"

Mr. Hazlewood was utterly discomfited by the failure of his plot, and when Stella attacked him so directly he had not a doubt but that she had divined his treachery.

"I?" he gasped. "Cruel? How?"

"In not telling me beforehand that I was to meet so good a friend of mine." Her face relaxed to a smile as she added: "I would have put on my best frock in his honour."

Undoubtedly Stella carried off the honour of

that encounter. She had at once driven the battle with spirit on to Hazlewood's own ground and left him worsted and confused. But the end was not yet. Mr. Hazlewood waited for his son Richard, and when Richard appeared he exclaimed :

“ Ah, here's my son. Let me present him to you, Mr. Thresk. And there's the family.”

He leaned back, with a smile in his eyes, watching Henry Thresk. Robert Pettifer watched too.

“ The family ? ” Thresk asked. “ Is Mrs. Ballantyne a relation then ? ”

“ She is going to be,” said Dick.

“ Yes,” Mr. Hazlewood explained, still beaming and still watchful. “ Richard and Stella are going to be married.”

A pause followed which was just perceptible before Thresk spoke again. But he had his face under control. He took the stroke without flinching. He turned to Dick with a smile.

“ Some men have all the luck,” he said, and Dick, who had been looking at him in bewilderment, cried :

“ Mr. Thresk ? Not the Mr. Thresk to whom I owe so much ? ”

“ The very man,” said Thresk, and Dick held out his hand to him gravely.

“ Thank you,” he said. “ When I think of the horrible net of doubt and assumption in which Stella was coiled, I tell you I feel cold down my spine even now. If you hadn't come forward with your facts——”

“ Yes,” Thresk interposed. “ If I hadn't come forward with my facts. But I couldn't well keep

them to myself, could I?" A few more words were said and then Dick rose from his chair.

"Time's up, Stella," and he explained to Henry Thresk: "We have to look over a house this afternoon."

"A house? Yes, I see," said Thresk, but he spoke slowly and there was just audible a little inflection of doubt in his voice. Stella was listening for it; she heard it when her two antagonists noticed nothing.

"But, Dick," she said quickly, "we can put the inspection off."

"Not on my account," Thresk returned. "There's no need for that." He was not looking at Stella whilst he spoke and she longed to see his face. She must know exactly how she stood with him, what he thought of her. She turned impulsively to Mr. Hazlewood.

"I haven't been asked, but may I come to dinner? You see I owe a good deal to Mr. Thresk."

Mr. Hazlewood was for the moment at a loss. He had not lost hope that between now and dinner-time explanations would be given which would banish Stella Ballantyne altogether from Little Beeding. But he had no excuse ready and he stammered out:

"Of course, my dear. Didn't I ask you? I must have forgotten. I certainly expect you to dine with us to-night. Margaret will no doubt be here."

Margaret Pettifer had taken little part in the conversation about the tea-table. She sat in frigid hostility, speaking only when politeness com-

manded. She accepted her brother's invitation with a monosyllable.

"Thank you," said Stella, and she faced Henry Thresk, looking him straight in the eyes but not daring to lay any special stress upon the words: "Then I shall see you to-night."

Thresk read in her face a prayer that he should hold his hand until she had a chance to speak with him. She turned away and went from the room with Dick Hazlewood.

The old man rose as soon as the door was closed.

"Now we might have a look at the miniatures, Mr. Thresk. You will excuse us, Margaret, won't you?"

"Of course," she answered upon a nod from her husband. The two men passed through the doors into the great library whilst Thresk took a more ceremonious leave of Mrs. Pettifer; and as Hazlewood opened the drawers of his cabinets Robert Pettifer said in a whisper:

"That was a pretty good failure, I must say. And it was my idea too."

"Yes," replied Hazlewood in a voice as low. "What do you think?"

"That they share no secret."

"You are satisfied then?"

"I didn't say that;" and Thresk himself appeared in the doorway and went across to the writing-table upon which Hazlewood had just laid a drawer in which miniatures were ranged.

"I haven't met you," said Pettifer, "since you led for us in the great Birmingham will-suit."

"No," answered Thresk as he took his seat at the table. "It wasn't quite such a tough fight as I expected. You see there wasn't one really reliable witness for the defence."

"No," said Pettifer grimly. "If there had been we should have been beaten."

Mr. Hazlewood began to point out this and that miniature of his collection, bending over Thresk as he did so. It seemed that the two collectors were quite lost in their common hobby until Robert Pettifer gave the signal.

Then Mr. Hazlewood began :

"I am very glad to meet you, Mr. Thresk, for reasons quite outside these miniatures of mine."

He spoke with a noticeable awkwardness, yet Henry Thresk disregarded it altogether.

"Oh!" he said carelessly.

"Yes. Being Richard's father I am naturally concerned in everything which affects him nearly—the trial of Stella Ballantyne for instance."

Thresk bent his head down over the tray.

"Quite so," he said. He pointed to a miniature. "I saw that at Christie's and coveted it myself."

"Did you?" Mr. Hazlewood asked, and he almost offered it as a bribe. "Now you gave evidence, Mr. Thresk."

Thresk never lifted his head.

"You have no doubt read the evidence I gave," he said, peering from this delicate jewel of the painter's art to that.

"To be sure."



“And since your son is engaged to Mrs. Ballantyne, I suppose that you were satisfied with it”—and he paused to give a trifle of significance to his next words—“as the jury was.”

“Yes, of course,” Mr. Hazlewood stammered, “but a witness, I think, only answers the questions put to him.”

“That is so,” said Thresk, “if he is a wise witness.” He took one of the miniatures out of the drawer and held it to the light. But Mr. Hazlewood was not to be deterred.

“And subsequent reflection,” he continued obstinately, “might suggest that all the questions which could throw light upon the trial had not been put.”

Thresk replaced the miniature in the drawer in front of him and leaned back in his chair. He looked now straight at Mr. Hazlewood.

“It was not, I take it, in order to put those questions to me that you were kind enough, Mr. Hazlewood, to ask me to give my opinion on your miniatures. For that would have been setting a trap for me, wouldn't it?”

Hazlewood stared at Thresk with the bland innocence of a child. “Oh no, no,” he declared, and then an insinuating smile beamed upon his long thin face. “Only since you *are* here and since so much is at stake for me—my son's happiness—I hoped that you might perhaps give us an answer or two which would disperse the doubts of some suspicious people.”

“Who are they?” asked Thresk.

"Neighbours of ours," replied Hazlewood, and thereupon Robert Pettifer stepped forward. He had remained aloof and silent until this moment. Now he spoke shortly, but he spoke to the point:

"I for one."

Thresk turned with a smile upon Pettifer.

"I thought so. I recognised Mr. Pettifer's hand in all this. But he ought to know that the sudden confrontation of a suspected person with unexpected witnesses takes place, in those countries where the method is practised, before the trial; not, as you so ingeniously arranged it this afternoon, two years after the verdict has been given."

Robert Pettifer turned red. Then he looked whimsically across the table at his brother-in-law.

"We had better make a clean breast of it, Hazlewood."

"I think so," said Thresk gently.

Pettifer came a step nearer. "We are in the wrong," he said bluntly. "But we have an excuse. Our trouble is very great. Here's my brother-in-law to begin with, whose whole creed of life has been to deride the authority of conventional man—to tilt against established opinion. Mrs. Ballantyne comes back from her trial in Bombay to make her home again at Little Beeding. Hazlewood champions her—not for her sake, but for the sake of his theories. It pleases his vanity. Now he can prove that he is not as others are."

Mr. Hazlewood did not relish this merciless analysis of his character. He twisted in his chair,

he uttered a murmur of protest. But Robert Pettifer waved him down and continued :

“ So he brings her to his house. He canvasses for her. He throws his son in her way. She has beauty—she has something more than beauty—she stands apart as a woman who has walked through fire. She has suffered very much. Look at it how one will, she has suffered beyond her deserts. She has pretty deferential ways which make their inevitable appeal to women as to men. In a word, Hazlewood sets the ball rolling and it gets beyond his reach.”

Thresk nodded.

“ Yes, I understand that.”

“ Finally, Hazlewood’s son falls in love with her—not a boy, mind, but a man claiming a man’s right to marry where he loves. And at once in Hazlewood conventional man awakes.”

“ Dear me, no,” interposed Harold Hazlewood.

“ But I say yes,” Pettifer continued imperturbably. “ Conventional man awakes in him and cries loudly against the marriage. Then there’s myself. I am fond of Dick. I have no child. He will be my heir and I am not poor. He is doing well in his profession. To be an Instructor of the Staff Corps at his age means hard work, keenness, ability. I look forward to a great career. I am very fond of him. And—understand me, Mr. Thresk”— he checked his speech and weighed his words very carefully—“ I wouldn’t say that he would not marry Stella Ballantyne just because Stella Ballantyne has lain under a grave charge of

which she has been acquitted. No, I may be as formal as my brother-in-law thinks, but I hold a wider faith than that. But I am not satisfied. That is the truth, Mr. Thresk. I am not sure of what happened in that tent in far-away Chitipur after you had ridden away to catch the night mail to Bombay."

Robert Pettifer had made his confession simply and with some dignity. Thresk looked at him for a few moments. Was he wondering whether he could answer the questions? Was he hesitating through anger at the trick which had been played upon him? Pettifer could not tell. He waited in suspense. Thresk pushed his chair back suddenly and came forward from behind the table.

"Ask your questions," he said.

"You consent to answer them?" Mr. Hazlewood cried joyously, and Thresk replied with coldness:

"I must. For if I don't consent your suspicions at once are double what they were. But I am not pleased."

"Oh, we practised a little diplomacy," said Hazlewood, making light of his offence.

"Diplomacy!" For the first time a gleam of anger shone in Thresk's eyes. "You have got me to your house by a trick. You have abused your position as my host. And but that I should injure a woman whom life has done nothing but injure I should go out of your door this instant."

He turned his back upon Harold Hazlewood and sat down in a chair opposite to Robert Pettifer. A

little round table separated them. Pettifer, seated upon a couch, took from his pocket the envelope with the press-cuttings and spread them on the table in front of him. Thresk lolled back in his chair. It was plain that he was in no terror of Pettifer's examination.

"I am at your service," he said.