

CHAPTER XXV

IN THE LIBRARY

HENRY THRESK took Mrs. Pettifer in to dinner that night and she found him poor company. He tried indeed by fits and starts to entertain her, but his thoughts were elsewhere. He was in a great pother and trouble about Stella Ballantyne, who sat over against him on the other side of the table. She wore no traces of the consternation which his words had caused her a couple of hours before. She had come dressed in a slim gown of shimmering blue, with her small head erect, a smile upon her lips and a bright colour in her cheeks. Thresk hardly knew her, he had to tell himself again and again that this was the Stella Ballantyne whom he had known here and in India. She was not the girl who had ridden with him upon the downs and made one month of his life very memorable and one day a shameful recollection. Nor was she the stricken creature of the tent in Chitipur. She was a woman sure of her resources, radiant in her beauty, confident that what she wore was her colour and gave her her value. Yet her trouble was greater than Thresk's, and many a time during the course of that dinner, when she felt his eyes

resting upon her, her heart sank in fear. She sought his company after dinner, but she had no chance of a private word with him. Old Mr. Hazlewood took care of that. One moment Stella must sing; at another she must play a rubber of bridge. He at all events had not laid aside his enmity and suspected some understanding between her and his guest. At eleven Mrs. Pettifer took her leave. She came across the room to Henry Thresk.

"Are you staying over to-morrow?" she asked, and Thresk with a laugh answered:

"I wish that I could. But I have to catch an early train to London. Even to-night my day's work's not over. I must sit up for an hour or two over a brief."

Stella rose at the same time as Mrs. Pettifer.

"I was hoping that you would be able to come across and see my little cottage to-morrow morning," she said. Thresk hesitated as he took her hand.

"I should very much like to see it," he said. He was in a very great difficulty, and was not sure that a letter was not the better if the more cowardly way out of it. "If I could find the time."

"Try," said she. She could say no more, for Mr. Hazlewood was at her elbow and Dick was waiting to take her home.

It was a dark clear night; a sky of stars over-arched the earth, but there was no moon, and though lights shone brightly even at a great

distance there was no glimmer from the road beneath their feet. Dick held her close in his arms at the door of her cottage. She was very still and passive.

"You are tired?" he asked.

"I think so."

"Well, to-night has seen the last of our troubles, Stella."

She did not answer him at once. Her hands clung about his shoulders and with her face smothered in his coat she whispered:

"Dick, I couldn't go on without you now. I couldn't. I wouldn't."

There was a note of passionate despair in her voice which made her words suddenly terrible to him. He took her and held her a little away from him, peering into her face.

"What are you saying, Stella?" he asked sternly. "You know that nothing can come between us. You break my heart when you talk like that." He drew her again into his arms. "Is your maid waiting up for you?"

"No."

"Call her then, while I wait here. Let me see the light in her room. I want her to sleep with you to-night."

"There's no need, Dick," she answered. "I am unstrung to-night. I said more than I meant. I swear to you there's no need."

He raised her head and kissed her on the lips.

"I trust you, Stella," he said gently; and she answered him in a low trembling voice of so much

tenderness and love that he was reassured. "Oh, you may, my dear, you may."

She went up to her room and turned on the light, and sat down in her chair just as she had done after her first dinner at Little Beeding. She had foreseen then all the troubles which had since beset her, but she had seemed to have passed through them—until this afternoon. Over there in the library of the big house was Henry Thresk—the stranger. Very likely he was at this moment writing to her. If he had only consented to come over in the morning and give her the chance of pleading with him! She went to the window and, drawing up the blind, leaned her head out and looked across the meadow. In the library one of the long windows stood open and the curtain was not drawn. The room was full of light. Henry Thresk was there. He had befriended her this afternoon as he had befriended her at Bombay, for the second time he had won the victory for her; but the very next moment he had warned her that the end was not yet. He would send her a letter, she had not a doubt of it. She had not a doubt either of the message which the letter would bring.

A sound rose to her ears from the gravel path below her window—the sound of a slight involuntary movement. Stella drew sharply back. Then she leaned out again and called softly:

"Dick."

He was standing a little to the left of the window out of reach of the light which streamed out upon

the darkness from the room behind her. He moved forward now.

"Oh, Dick, why are you waiting?"

"I wanted to be sure that all was right, Stella."

"I gave you my word, Dick," she whispered and she wished him good-night again and waited till the sound of his footsteps had altogether died away. He went back to the house and found Thresk still at work in the library.

"I don't want to interrupt you," he said, "but I must thank you again. I can't tell you what I owe you. She's pretty wonderful, isn't she? I feel coarse beside her, I tell you. I couldn't talk like this to any one else, but you're so sympathetic."

Henry Thresk had responded with nothing more than a grunt. He sat slashing at his brief with a blue pencil, all the while that Dick Hazlewood was speaking, and wishing that he would go to bed. Dick however was unabashed.

"Did you ever see a woman look so well in a blue frock? Or in a black one either? There's a sort of painted thing she wears sometimes too. Well, perhaps I had better go to bed."

"I think it would be wise," said Thresk.

Young Hazlewood went over to the table in the corner and lit his candle.

"You'll shut that window before you go to bed, won't you?"

"Yes."

Hazlewood filled for himself a glass of barley-water and drank it, contemplating Henry Thresk

over the rim. Then he went back to him, carrying his candle in his hand.

"Why don't you get married, Mr. Thresk?" he asked. "You ought to, you know. Men run to seed so if they don't."

"Thank you," said Thresk.

The tone was not cordial, but mere words were an invitation to Dick Hazlewood at this moment. He sat down and placed his lighted candle on the table between Thresk and himself.

"I am thirty-four years old," he said, and Thresk interposed without glancing up from his foolscap:

"From your style of conversation I find that very difficult to believe, Captain Hazlewood."

"I have wasted thirty-four complete years of twelve months each," continued the ecstatic Captain, who appeared to think that on the very day of his birth he would have recognised his soul's mate. "Just jogging along with the world, a miracle about one and not half an eye to perceive it. You know."

"No, I don't," Thresk observed. He lifted the candle and held it out to Dick. Dick got up and took it.

"Thank you," he said. "That was very kind of you. I told you—didn't I?—how sympathetic I thought you."

Thresk was not proof against his companion's pertinacity. He broke into a laugh. "Are you going to bed?" he pleaded, and Dick Hazlewood replied, "Yes, I am." Suddenly his tone changed.

“Stella had a very good friend in you, Mr. Thresk. I am sure she still has one,” and without waiting for any answer he went upstairs. His bedroom was near to the front in the side of the house. It commanded a view of the meadow and the cottage and he rejoiced to see that all Stella’s windows were dark. The library was out of sight round the corner at the back, but a glare of light from the open door spread out over the lawn. Hazlewood looked at his watch. It was just midnight. He went to bed and slept.

In the library Thresk strove to concentrate his thoughts upon his brief. But he could not, and he threw it aside at last. There was a letter to be written, and until it was written and done with his thoughts would not be free. He went over to the writing-table and wrote it. But it took a long while in the composition and the clock upon the top of the stable was striking one when at last he had finished and sealed it up.

“I’ll post it in the morning at the station,” he resolved, and he went to the window to close it. But as he touched it a slight figure wrapped in a dark cloak came out of the darkness at the side and stepped past him into the room. He swung round and saw Stella Ballantyne.

“You !” he exclaimed. “You must be mad.”

“I had to come,” she said, standing well away from the window in the centre of the room as though she thought he would drive her out. “I heard you say you would be sitting late here.”

“How long have you been waiting out there ?”

"A little while . . . I don't know. . . . Not very long. I wasn't sure that you were alone."

Thresk closed the window and drew the curtain across it. Then he crossed the room and locked the doors leading into the dining-room and hall.

"There was no need for you to come," he said in a low voice. "I have written to you."

"Yes." She nodded her head. "That's why I had to come. This afternoon you spoke of leaving your pipe behind. I understood," and as he drew the letter from his pocket she recoiled from it. "No, it has never been written. I came in time to prevent its being written. You only had an idea of writing. Say that! You are my friend." She took the letter from him now and tore it across and again across. "See! It has never been written at all."

But Thresk only shook his head. "I am very sorry. I see to-night the stricken woman of the tent in Chitipur. I am very sorry," and Stella caught at the commiseration in his voice. She dropped the cloak from her shoulders; she was dressed as she had been at the dinner some hours before, but all her radiance had gone, her cheeks trembled, her eyes pleaded desperately.

"Sorry! I knew you would be. You are not hard. You couldn't be. You must come close day by day in your life to so much that is pitiful. One can talk to you and you'll understand. This is my first chance, the first real chance I have ever had, Henry, the very first."

Thresk looked backwards over the years of Stella

Ballantyne's unhappy life. It came upon him with a shock that what she said was the bare truth; and remorse followed hard upon the heels of the shock. This was her first real chance and he himself was to blame that it had come no earlier. The first chance of a life worth the living—it had been in his hands to give her and he had refused to give it years ago on Bignor Hill.

"It's quite true," he admitted. "But I don't ask you to give it up, Stella." She looked at him eagerly. "No! You would have understood that if you had read my letter instead of tearing it up. I only ask you to tell your lover the truth."

"He knows it," she said sullenly.

"No!"

"He does! He does!" she protested, her voice rising to a low cry.

"Hush! You'll be heard," said Thresk, and she listened for a moment anxiously. But there was no sound of any one stirring in the house.

"We are safe here," she said. "No one sleeps above us. Henry, he knows the truth."

"Would you be here now if he did?"

"I came because this afternoon you seemed to be threatening me. I didn't understand. I couldn't sleep. I saw the light in this room. I came to ask you what you meant—that's all."

"I'll tell you what I meant," said Thresk, and Stella with her eyes fixed upon him sank down upon a chair. "I left my pipe behind me in the tent on the night I dined with you. Your lover, Stella, doesn't know that. I came back to fetch

it. He doesn't know that. You were standing by the table——” and Stella Ballantyne broke in upon him to silence the words upon his lips.

“There was no reason why he should know,” she exclaimed. “It had nothing to do with what happened. We know what happened. There was a thief”—and Thresk turned to her then with such a look of sheer amazement upon his face that she faltered and her voice died to a murmur of words—“a lean brown arm—a hand delicate as a woman's.”

“There was no thief,” he said quietly. “There was a man, delirious with drink who imagined one. There was you with the bruises on your throat and the unutterable misery in your eyes and a little rifle in your hands. There was no one else.”

She ceased to argue; she sat looking straight in front of her with a stubborn face and a resolution to cling at all costs to her chance of happiness.

“Come, Stella,” Thresk pleaded. “I don't say tell every one. I do say tell him. For unless you do I must.”

Stella stared at him.

“You?” she said. “You would tell him that you came back into the tent and saw me?”

“Oh, much more—that I lied at the trial, that the story which secured your acquittal was false, that I made it up to save you. That I told it again this afternoon to give you a chance of slipping out from an impossible position.”

She looked at Thresk for a moment in terror.

Then her expression changed. A wave of relief swept over her; she laughed in Thresk's face.

"You are trying to frighten me," she said. "Only I know you. Do you realise what it would mean to you if it were ever really known that you had lied at the trial?"

"Yes."

"Your ruin. Your absolute ruin."

"Worse than that."

"Prison!"

"Perhaps. Yes."

Stella laughed again.

"And you would run the risk of the truth becoming known by telling it to so much as one person. No, no! Another, perhaps—not you! You have had one dream all your life—to rise out of obscurity, to get on in the world, to hold the high positions. Everything and every one has been sacrificed to its fulfilment. Oh, who should know better than I?" and she struck her hands together sharply as she uttered that bitter cry. "You have lain down late and risen early, and you have got on. Well, are you the man to throw away all this work and success now that they touch fulfilment? You are in the chariot. Will you step down and run tied to the wheels? Will you stand up and say 'There was a trial. I perjured myself'? No. Another, perhaps. Not you, Harry."

Thresk had no answer to that indictment. All of it was true except its inference, and it was no news to him. He made no effort to defend himself.

"You are not very generous, Stella," he replied gently. "For if I lied, I saved you by the lie."

Stella was softened by the words. Her voice lost its hardness, she reached out her hand in an apology and laid it on his arm.

"Oh, I know. I sent you a little word of thanks when you gave me my freedom. But it won't be of much value to me if I lose—what I am fighting for now."

"So you use every weapon?"

"Yes."

"But this one breaks in your hand," he said firmly. "The thing you think it incredible that I should do I shall do none the less."

Stella looked at him in despair. She could no longer doubt that he really meant his words. He was really resolved to make this sacrifice of himself and her. And why? Why should he interfere?

"You save me one day to destroy me the next," she said.

"No," he replied. "I don't think I shall do that, Stella," and he explained to her what drove him on. "I had no idea why Hazlewood asked me here. Had I suspected it I say frankly that I should have refused to come. But I am here. The trouble's come more at my door but in a new shape. There's this man, young Hazlewood. I can't forget him. You will be marrying him by the help of a lie I told."

"He loves me," she cried.

"Then he can bear the truth," answered Thresk.

He pulled up a chair opposite to that in which Stella sat. "I want you to understand me, if you will. I don't want you to think me harsh or cruel. I told a lie upon my oath in the witness-box. I violated my traditions, I struck at my belief in the value of my own profession, and such beliefs mean a good deal to any man." Stella stirred impatiently. What words were these? Traditions! The value of a profession!

"I am not laying stress upon them, Stella; but they count," Thresk continued. "And I am telling you that they count because I am going to add that I should tell that lie again to-morrow, were the trial to-morrow and you a prisoner. I should tell it again to save you again. Yes, to save you. But when you go and—let me put it very plainly—use that lie to your advantage, why then I am bound to cry 'stop.' Don't you see that? You are using the lie to marry a man and keep him in ignorance of the truth. You can't do that, Stella! You would be miserable yourself if you did all your life. You would never feel safe for a moment. You would be haunted by a fear that some day he would learn the truth and not from you. Oh, I am sure of it." He caught her hands and pressed them earnestly. "Tell him, Stella, tell him!"

Stella Ballantyne rose to her feet with a strange look upon her face. Her eyes half closed as though to shut out a vision of past horrors. She turned to Thresk with a white face and her hands tightly clenched.

“ You don't know what happened on that night, after you rode away to catch your train ? ”

“ No.”

“ I think you ought to know—before you sit in judgment ; ” and so at last in that quiet library under the Sussex Downs the tragic story of that night was told. For Thresk as he listened and watched, its terrors lived again in the eyes and the hushed voice of Stella Ballantyne, the dark walls seemed to fall back and dissolve. The moonlit plain of far-away Chitipur stretched away in front of him to the dim hill where the old silent palaces crumbled ; and midway between them and the green signal-lights of the railway the encampment blazed like the clustered lights of a small town. But Thresk learnt more than the facts. The springs of conduct were disclosed to him ; the woman revealed herself, dark places were made light ; and he bowed himself beneath a new burden of remorse.