

## CHAPTER XXVI

### TWO STRANGERS

“You came back to the tent,” she began, “and ever since then you have misunderstood what you saw. For this is the truth: I was going to kill myself.”

Thresk was startled as he had not expected to be; and a great wave of relief swept over him and uplifted his soul. Here was the simplest explanation, yet it had never occurred to him. Always he had been besieged by the vision of Stella standing quietly by the table, deliberately preparing her rifle for use, always he had linked up that vision with the death of Stephen Ballantyne in a dreadful connection. He did not doubt that she spoke the truth now. Looking at her and noticing the anguish of her face, he could not doubt it. So definite a premeditation as he had imagined there had not been, and relief carried him to pity.

“So it had come to that?” he said.

“Yes,” replied Stella. “And you had your share in bringing it to that—you who sit in judgment.”

“I!” Thresk exclaimed.

“Yes, you who sit in judgment. I am not alone.

No, I am not alone. A crime was committed ? Then you must shoulder your portion of the blame."

Thresk asked himself in vain what was his share. He had done a cowardly thing years ago a few miles from this spot. He had never ceased to reproach himself for the cowardice. But that it had lived and worked like some secret malady until in the end it had made him an all-unconscious accomplice in that midnight tragedy, a sharer in its guilt, if guilt there were—here again was news for him. But the knowledge which her first words had given to him, that all these years he had never got the truth of her, kept him humble now. He ceased to be judge. He became pupil, and as pupil he answered her.

"I am ready to shoulder it."

He was seated on a cushioned bench which stood behind the writing-table and Stella sat down at his side.

"When we parted—that morning—it was in the drawing-room over there in my cottage. We parted, you to your work of getting on, Henry, I to think of you getting on without me at your side. There was a letter lying on the table, a letter from India. Jane Repton had written it and she asked me to go out to her for the cold weather. I went. I was a young girl, lonely and very unhappy, and as young girls often do who are lonely and very unhappy I drifted into marriage."

"I see," said Thresk in a hushed voice. The terrible conviction grew upon him now, lurid as the breaking of a day of storm, that the cowardice

he had shown on Bignor Hill ruined her altogether and hurt him not at all. "Yes, I see. There my share begins."

"Oh no. Not yet," she answered. "Then I spoke when I should have kept silence. I let my heart go out when I should have guarded it. No, I cannot blame you."

"You have the right none the less."

But Stella would not excuse herself now and to him by any subtlety or artifice.

"No: I married. That was my affair. I was beaten—despised—ridiculed—terrified by a husband who drank secretly and kept all his drunkenness for me. That, too, was my affair. But I might have gone on. For seven years it had lasted. I was settling into a dull habit of misery. I might have gone on being bullied and tortured had not one little thing happened to push me over the precipice."

"And what was that?" asked Thresk.

"Your visit to me at Chitipur," she replied, and the words took his breath away. Why, he had travelled to Chitipur merely to save her. He leaned forward eagerly, but she anticipated him. She smiled at him with an indulgent forgiveness: "Oh, why did you come? But I know."

"Do you?" Thresk asked. Here at all events she was wrong.

"Yes. You came because of that one weak soft spot of sentimentalism there is in all of you, the strongest, the hardest. You are strong for years. You live alone for years. Then comes the

sentimental moment and it's we who suffer, not you."

And deep in Thresk's mind was the terror of the mistakes people make in ignorance of each other, and of the mortal hurt the mistakes inflict. He had misread Stella. Here was she misreading him and misreading him in some strange way to her peril and ruin.

"You are sure of that?" he asked. She had no doubt—no more doubt than he had had of the reason why she stood preparing her rifle.

"Quite," she answered. "You had heard of me in Bombay and it came over you that you would like to see how the woman you had loved looked after all these years: whether she retained her pretty way, whether she missed you—ah, above all, whether she missed you. You wanted to fan up into a mild harmless flame the ashes of an old romance, warm your hands at it for half an hour, recapture a savour of dim and pleasant memories and then go back to your own place and your own work, untouched and unhurt."

Thresk laughed aloud with bitterness at the mistake she had made. Yet he could not blame her. There was a certain shrewd insight which though it had led her astray in this case might well have been true in any other case, might well have been true of him. He remembered her disbelief in all that he had said to her in that tent at Chitipur; and he was appalled by the irony of things and the blind and feeble helplessness of men to combat it.

“ So that’s why I came to Chitipur ? ” he cried.

“ Yes,” Stella answered without a second of hesitation. “ But I couldn’t be left untouched and unhurt. You came and all that I had lost came with you, came in a vivid rush of bright intolerable memories.” She clasped her hands over her eyes and Thresk lived over again that evening in the tent upon the desert, but with a new understanding. His mind was illumined. He saw the world as a prison in which each living being is shut off from his neighbour by the impenetrable wall of an inability to understand.

“ Memories of summers here,” she resumed, “ of women friends, of dainty and comfortable things, and days of great happiness when it was good—oh so very good!—to be alive and young. And you were going back to it all, straight by the night-mail to Bombay, straight from the station on board your ship. Oh, how it hurt to hear you speak of it, with a casual pleasant word about exile and next-door neighbours ! ” She clasped her hands together in front of her, her fingers worked and twisted. “ No, I couldn’t endure it,” she whispered. “ The blows, the ridicule, the contempt, I determined, should come to an end that night, and when you saw me with the rifle in my hand I was going to end it.”

“ Yes ? ”

“ And then the stupidest thing happened. I couldn’t find the little box of cartridges.”

Stella described to him how she had run hither and thither about the tent, opening drawers, look-

ing into bags and growing more nervous and more flurried with every second that passed. She had so little time. Ballantyne was not going as far as the station with Thresk. He merely intended to see his visitor off beyond the edge of the camp. And it must all be over and done with before he came back. She heard Ballantyne call to Thresk to sit firm while the camel rose; and still she had not found them. She heard Thresk's voice saying good-night.

“The last words, Harry, I wanted to hear in the world. I thought that I would wait for them and the moment they had died away—then. But I hadn't found the cartridges and so the search began again.”

Thresk, watching her as she lived through again those desperate minutes, was carried back to Chitipur and seemed to be looking into that tent. He had a dreadful picture before his eyes of a hunted woman rushing wildly from table to table, with a white, quivering face and lips which babbled incoherently and feverish hands which darted out nervously, over-setting books and ornaments—in a vain search for a box of cartridges wherewith to kill herself. She found them at last behind the whisky bottle, and clutched at them with a great sigh of relief. She carried them over to the table on which she had laid her rifle, and as she pushed one into the breach Stephen Ballantyne stood in the doorway of the tent.

“He swore at me,” Stella continued. “I had taker the necklace off. I had shown you the

bruises on my throat. He cursed me for it, and he asked me roughly why I didn't shoot myself and rid him of a fool. I stood without answering him. That always maddened him. I didn't do it on purpose. I had become dull and slow. I just stood and looked at him stupidly, and in a fury he ran at me with his fist raised. I recoiled, he frightened me, and then before he reached me—yes." Her voice died away in a whisper. Thresk did not interrupt. There was more for her to tell and one dreadful incident to explain. Stella went on in a moment, looking straight in front of her and with all the passion of fear gone from her voice.

"I remember that he stood and stared at me foolishly for a little while. I had time to believe that nothing had happened, and to be glad that nothing had happened and to be terrified of what he would do to me. And then he fell and lay quite still."

It seemed that she had no more to say, that she meant to leave unexplained the inexplicable thing; and even Thresk put it out of his thoughts.

"It was an accident then," he cried. "After all, Stella, it was an accident."

But Stella sat mutely at his side. Some struggle was taking place in her and was reflected in her countenance. Thresk's eager joy was damped.

"No, my friend," she said at length, slowly and very deliberately. "It was not an accident."

"But you fired in fear." Thresk caught now at that alternative. "You shot in self-defence.

Stella, I blundered at Bombay." He moved away from her in his agitation. "I am sorry. Oh, I am very sorry. I should never have come forward at all. I should have lain quiet and let your counsel develop his case, as he was doing, on the line of self-defence. You would have been acquitted—and rightly acquitted. You would have had the sympathy of every one. But I didn't know your story. I was afraid that the discovery of Ballantyne outside the tent would ruin you. I knew that my story could not fail to save you. So I told it. But I was wrong, Stella. I blundered. I did you a great harm."

He was standing before her now and so poignant an anguish rang in his voice that Stella was moved by it to discard her plans. Thus she had meant to tell the story, if ever she was driven to it. Thus she had told it. But now she put out a timid hand and took him by the arm.

"I said I would tell you the truth. But I have not told it all. It's so hard not to keep one little last thing back. Listen to me;" and with a bowed head and her hand still clinging desperately to his arm she made the final revelation.

"It's true I was crazy with fear. But there was just one little moment when I knew what I was going to do, when it came upon me that the way I had chosen before was the wrong one, and this new way the right one. No, no," she cried as Thresk moved. "Even that's not all. That moment—you could hardly measure it in time, yet to me it was distinct enough and is marked



distinctly in my memories, for during it *he* drew back."

"What?" cried Thresk. "Don't say it, Stella!"

"Yes," she answered. "During it he drew back, knowing what I was going to do just as I suddenly knew it. It was a moment when he seemed to me to bleat—yes, that's the word—to bleat for mercy."

She had told the truth now and she dropped her hand from his sleeve.

"And you? What did you do?" asked Thresk.

"I? Oh, I went mad, I think. When I saw him lying there I lost my head. The tent was flecked with great spots of fire which whirled in front of my eyes and hurt. A strength far greater than mine possessed me. I was crazy. I dragged him out of the tent—for no reason—that's the truth—for no reason at all. Can you believe that?"

"Yes," replied Thresk readily enough. "I can well believe that."

"Then something broke," she resumed. "I felt weak and numbed. I dragged myself to my room. I went to bed. Does that sound very horrible to you? I had one clear thought only. It was over. It was all over. I slept." She leaned back in her chair, her hands dropped to her side, her eyes closed. "Yes, I did actually sleep."

A clock ticking upon the mantelshelf seemed to grow louder and louder in the silence of the library

The sound of it forced itself upon Thresk. It roused Stella. She opened her eyes. In front of her Thresk was standing, his face grave and very pitiful.

"Now answer me truly," said Stella, and leaning forward she fixed her eyes upon him. "If you still loved me, would you, knowing this story, refuse to marry me?"

Thresk looked back across the years of her unhappy life and saw her as the sport of a malicious destiny.

"No," he said, "I should not."

"Then why shouldn't Dick marry me?"

"Because he doesn't know this story."

Stella nodded her head.

"Yes. There's the flaw in my appeal to you, I know. You are quite right. I should have told him. I should tell him now," and suddenly she dropped on her knees before Thresk, the tears burst from her eyes, and in a voice broken with passion she cried:

"But I daren't—not yet. I have tried to—oh, more than once. Believe that, Harry! You must believe it! But I couldn't. I hadn't the courage. You will give me a little time, won't you? Oh, not long. I will tell him of my own free will—very soon, Harry. But not now—not now."

The sound of her sobbing and the sight of her distress wrung Thresk's heart. He lifted her from the ground and held her.

"There's another way, Stella," he said gently.

"Oh, I know," she answered. She was think-

ing of the little bottle with the tablets of veronal which stood by her bed, not for the first time that night. She did not stop to consider whether Thresk, too, had that way in his mind. It came to her so naturally; it was so easy, so simple a way. She never thought that she misunderstood. She had come to the end of the struggle; the battle had gone against her; she recognised it; and now, without complaint, she bowed her head for the final blow. The inherited habit of submission taught her that the moment had come for compliance and gave her the dignity of patience. "Yes, I suppose that I must take that way," she said, and she walked towards the chair over which she had thrown her wrap. "Good-night, Harry."

But before she had thrown the cloak about her shoulders Thresk stood between her and the window. He took the cloak from her hands.

"There have been too many mistakes, Stella, between you and me. There must be no more. Here are we—until to-night strangers, and because we were strangers, and never knew it, spoiling each other's lives."

Stella looked at him in bewilderment. She had taught Thresk that night unimagined truths about herself. She was now to learn something of the inner secret man which the outward trappings of success concealed. He led her to a sofa and placed her at his side.

"You have said a good many hard things to me, Stella," he said with a smile—"most of them true, but some untrue. And the untrue things you

wouldn't have said if you had ever chanced to ask yourself one question: why I really missed my steamer at Bombay."

Stella Ballantyne was startled. She made a guess but faltered in the utterance of it, so ill it fitted with her estimate of him.

"You missed it on purpose?"

"Yes. I didn't come to Chitipur on any sentimental journey;" and he told how he had seen her portrait in Mrs. Carruther's drawing-room and learnt of the misery of her marriage.

"I came to fetch you away."

And again Stella stared at him.

"You? You pitied me so much? Oh, Harry!"

"No. I wanted you so much. It's quite true that I sacrificed everything for success. I don't deny that it is well worth having. But Jane Repton said something to me in Bombay so true—you can get whatever you want if you want it enough, but you cannot control the price you will have to pay. I know, my dear, that I paid too big a price. I trampled down something better worth having."

Stella rose suddenly to her feet.

"Oh, if I had known that on the night in Chitipur! What a difference it would have made!" She turned swiftly to him. "Couldn't you have told me?"

"I hadn't a chance. I hadn't five minutes with you alone. And you wouldn't have believed me if I had had the chance. I left my pipe behind me in order to come back and tell you. I had

only the time then to tell you that I would write."

"Yes, yes," she answered, and again the cry burst from her: "What a difference it would have made! Merely to have known that you really wanted me!"

She would never have taken that rifle from the corner and searched for the cartridges that she might kill herself! Whether she had consented or not to go away and ruin Thresk's future she would have had a little faith wherewith to go on and face the world. If she had only known! But up on the top of Bignor Hill a blow had been struck under which her faith had reeled and it had never had a chance of recovery. She laughed harshly. The heart of her tragedy was now revealed to her. She saw herself the sport of gods who sat about like cruel louts torturing a helpless animal and laughing stupidly at its sufferings. She turned again to Thresk and held out her hand.

"Thank you. You would have ruined yourself for me."

"Ruin's a large word," he answered, and still holding her hand he drew her down again. She yielded reluctantly. She might misread his character, but when the feelings and emotions were aroused she had the unerring insight of her sex. She was warned by it now. She looked at Thresk with startled eyes.

"Why have you told me all this?" she asked in suspense, ready for flight.

"I want to prepare you. There's a way out of

the trouble—the honest way for both of us: to make a clean breast of it together and together take what follows.”

She was on her feet and away from him in a second.

“No, no,” she cried in alarm, and Thresk mistook the cause of the alarm.

“You can’t be tried again, Stella. That’s over. You have been acquitted.”

She temporised.

“But you?”

“I?” and he shrugged his shoulders. “I take the consequences. I doubt if they would be so very heavy. There would be some sympathy. And afterwards—it would be as though you had slipped down from Chitipur to Bombay and joined me as I had planned. We can make the best of our lives together.”

There was so much sincerity in his manner, so much simplicity she could not doubt him; and the immensity of the sacrifice he was prepared to make overwhelmed her. It was not merely scandal and the Divorce Court which he was ready to brave now. He had gone beyond the plan contemplated at Bombay. He was willing to go hand in hand with her into the outer darkness, laying down all that he had laboured for unsparingly.

“You would do that for me?” she said. “Oh, you put me to shame!” and she covered her face with her hands.

“You give up your struggle for a footing in the

world—that's what you want, isn't it?" He pleaded, and she drew her hands away from her face. He believed that? He imagined that she was fighting just for a name, a position in the world? She stared at him in amazement, and forced herself to understand. Since he himself had cared for her enough to remain unmarried, since the knowledge of the mistake which he had made had grown more bitter with each year, he had fallen easily into that other error that she had never ceased to care too.

"We'll make something of our lives, never fear," he was saying. "But to marry this man for his position, and he not knowing—oh, my dear, I know how you are driven—but it won't do! It won't do!"

She stood in silence for a little while. One by one he had torn her defences down. She could hardly bear the gentleness upon his face and she turned away from him and sat down upon a chair a little way off.

"Stand there, Harry," she said. A strange composure had succeeded her agitation. "I must tell you something more which I had meant to hide from you—the last thing which I have kept back. It will hurt you, I am afraid."

There came a change upon Thresh's face. He was steeling himself to meet a blow.

"Go on."

"It isn't because of his position that I cling to Dick. I want him to keep that—yes—for his sake. I don't want him to lose more by marrying me

than he needs must ; ” and comprehension burst upon Henry Thresk.

“ You care for him then ! You really care for him ? ”

“ So much, ” she answered, “ that if I lost him now I should lose all the world. You and I can’t go back to where we stood nine years ago. You had your chance then, Harry, if you had wished to take it. But you didn’t wish it, and that sort of chance doesn’t often come again. Others like it — yes. But not quite the same one. I am sorry. But you must believe me. If I lost Dick I should lose all the world. ”

So far she had spoken very deliberately, but now her voice faltered.

“ That is my one poor excuse. ”

The unexpected word roused Thresk to inquiry.

“ Excuse ? ” he asked, and with her eyes fixed in fear upon him she continued :

“ Yes. I meant Dick to marry me publicly. But I saw that his father shrank from the marriage. I grew afraid. I told Dick of my fears. He banished them. I let him banish them. ”

“ What do you mean ? ” Thresk asked.

“ We were married privately in London five days ago. ”

Thresk uttered a low cry and in a moment Stella was at his side, all her composure gone.

“ Oh, I know that it was wrong. But I was being hunted. They were all like a pack of wolves after me. Mr. Hazlewood had joined them. I was driven into a corner. I loved Dick. They meant



to tear him from me without any pity. I clung. Yes, I clung."

But Thresk thrust her aside.

"You tricked him," he cried.

"I didn't dare to tell him," Stella pleaded, wringing her hands. "I didn't dare to lose him."

"You tricked him," Thresk repeated; and at the note of anger in his voice Stella found herself again.

"You accuse and condemn me?" she asked quietly.

"Yes. A thousand times, yes," he exclaimed hotly, and she answered with another question winged on a note of irony:

"Because I tricked him? Or because I—married him?"

Thresk was silenced. He recognised the truth implied in the distinction, he turned to her with a smile.

"Yes," he answered. "You are right, Stella. It's because you married him."

He stood for a moment in thought. Then with a gesture of helplessness he picked up her cloak. She watched his action and as he came towards her she cried:

"But I'll tell him now, Harry." In a way she owed it to this man who cared for her so much, who was so prepared for sacrifice, if sacrifice could help. That morning on the downs was swept from her memory now. "Yes, I'll tell him now," she said eagerly. Since Henry Thresk set such

store upon that confession, why, so very likely would Dick, her husband, too.

But Thresk shook his head.

“What’s the use now? You give him no chance. You can’t set him free;” and Stella was as one turned to stone. All argument seemed sooner or later to turn to that one dread alternative which had already twice that night forced itself on her acceptance.

“Yes, I can, Harry, and I will, I promise you, if he wishes to be free. I can do it quite easily, quite naturally. Any woman could. So many of us take things to make us sleep.”

There was no boastfulness in her voice or manner, but rather a despairing recognition of facts.

“Good God, you musn’t think of it!” said Thresk eagerly. “That’s too big a price to pay.”

Stella shook her head wistfully.

“You hear it said, Harry,” she answered with an indescribable wistfulness, “that women will do anything to keep the men they love. They’ll do a great deal—I am an example—but not always everything. Sometimes love runs just a little stronger. And then it craves that the loved one shall get all he wants to have. If Dick wants his freedom I too, then, shall want him to have it.”

And while Thresk stood with no words to answer her there came a knocking upon the door. It was gentle, almost furtive, but it startled them both like a clap of thunder. For a moment they stood rigid. Then Thresk silently handed Stella her cloak and pointed towards the window. He

began to speak aloud. A word or two revealed his plan to Stella Ballantyne. He was rehearsing a speech which he was to make in the Courts before a jury. But the handle of the door rattled and now old Mr. Hazlewood's voice was heard.

"Thresk! Are you there?"

Once more Thresk pointed to the window. But Stella did not move.

"Let him in," she said quietly, and with a glance at her he unlocked the door.

Mr. Hazlewood stood outside. He had not gone to bed that night. He had taken off his coat and now wore a smoking-jacket.

"I knew that I should not sleep to-night, so I sat up," he began, "and I thought that I heard voices here."

Over Thresk's shoulder he saw Stella Ballantyne standing erect in the middle of the room, her shining gown the one bright patch of colour. "You here?" he cried to her, and Thresk made way for him to enter. He advanced to her with a look of triumph in his eyes.

"You here—at this house—with Thresk? You were persuading him to continue to hold his tongue."

Stella met his gaze steadily.

"No," she replied. "He was persuading me to tell the truth, and he has succeeded."

Mr. Hazlewood smiled and nodded. There was no magnanimity in his triumph. A schoolboy would have shown more chivalry to the opponent who was down.

"You confess then? Good! Richard must be told."

"Yes," answered Stella. "I claim the right to tell him."

But Mr. Hazlewood scoffed at the proposal.

"Oh dear no!" he cried. "I refuse the claim. I shall go straight to Richard now."

He had actually taken a couple of steps towards the door before Stella's voice rang out suddenly loud and imperative

"Take care, Mr. Hazlewood. After you have told him he will come to me. Take care!"

Hazlewood stopped. Certainly that was true.

"I'll tell Dick to-morrow, here, in your presence," she said. "And if he wishes it I'll set him free and never trouble either of you again."

Hazlewood looked at Thresk and was persuaded to consent. Reflection showed him that it was the better plan. He himself would be present when Stella spoke. He would see that the truth was told without embroidery.

"Very well, to-morrow," he said.

Stella flung the cloak over her shoulders and went up to the window. Thresk opened it for her.

"I'll see you to your door," he said.

The moon had risen now. It hung low with the branches of a tree like a lattice across its face; and on the garden and the meadow lay that unearthly light which falls when a moonlit night begins to drown in the onrush of the dawn.

"No," she said. "I would rather go alone. But do something for me, will you? Stay to-

morrow. Be here when I tell him." She choked down a sob. "Oh, I shall want a friend and you are so kind."

"So kind!" he repeated with a note of bitterness. Could there be praise from a woman's lips more deadly? You are kind; you are put in your place in the ruck of men; you are extinguished.

"Oh yes, I'll stay."

She stood for a moment on the stone flags outside the window.

"Will he forgive?" she asked. "You would. And he is not so very young, is he? It's the young who don't forgive. Good-night."

She went along the path and across the meadow. Thresk watched her go and saw the light spring up in her room. Then he closed the window and drew the curtain. Mr. Hazlewood had gone. Thresk wondered what the morrow would bring. After all, Stella was right. Youth could be hard. Yes, he was glad Dick Hazlewood was half his way through the thirties. For himself—well, he knew his business. It was to be kind. He turned off the lights and went to bed