CHAPTER XXVII

THE LAST

"Six, seven, eight," said Mr. Hazlewood, counting the letters which he had already written since breakfast and placing them on the salver which Hubbard was holding out to him. He was a very different man this morning from the Mr. Hazlewood of yesterday. He shone, complacent and serene. He leaned back in his chair and gazed mildly at the butler. "There must be an answer to the problem which I put to you, Hubbard."

Hubbard wrinkled his brows in thought and succeeded only in looking a hundred and ten years old. He had the melancholy look of a moulting bird. He shook his head and drooped.

"No doubt, sir," he said.

"But as far as you are concerned," Mr. Hazlewood continued briskly, "you can throw no light upon it?"

"Not a glimmer, sir."

Mr. Hazlewood was disappointed and with him disappointment was petulance.

"That is unlike you, Hubbard," he said, "for sometimes after I have been deliberating for days over some curious and perplexing conundrum,

you have solved it the moment it has been put to you."

Hubbard drooped still lower. He began the droop as a bow of acknowledgment, but forgot to raise his head again.

"It is very good of you, sir," he said. He seemed oppressed by the goodness of Mr. Hazlewood.

"Yet you are not clever, Hubbard! Not at all clever."

"No, sir. I know my place," returned the butler, and Mr. Hazlewood continued with a little envy.

"You must have some wonderful gift of insight which guides you straight to the inner meaning of things."

"It's just common-sense, sir," said Hubbard.

"But I haven't got it," cried Mr. Hazlewood. "How's that?"

"You don't need it, sir. You are a gentleman," Hubbard replied, and carried the letters to the door. There, however, he stopped. "I beg your pardon, sir," he said, "but a new parcel of *The Prison Walls* has arrived this morning. Shall I unpack it?"

Mr. Hazlewood frowned and scratched his ear.

"Well—er—no, Hubbard—no," he said with a trifle of discomfort. "I am not sure indeed that *The Prison Walls* is not almost one of my mistakes. We all make mistakes, Hubbard. I think you shall burn that parcel, Hubbard—somewhere where it won't be noticed."

"Certainly, sir," said Hubbard. "I'll burn it under the shadow of the south wall."

Mr. Hazlewood looked up with a start. Was it possible that Hubbard was poking fun at him? The mere notion was incredible and indeed Hubbard shuffled with so much meekness from the room that Mr. Hazlewood dismissed it. He went across the hall to the dining-room, where he found Henry Thresk trifling with his breakfast. No embarrassment weighed upon Mr. Hazlewood this morning. He effervesced with good-humour.

"I do not blame you, Mr. Thresk," he said, "for the side you took yesterday afternoon. You were a stranger to us in this house. I understand your position."

"I am not quite so sure, Mr. Hazlewood," said Thresk drily, "that I understand yours. For my part I have not closed my eyes all night. You, on the other hand, seem to have slept well."

"I did indeed," said Hazlewood. "I was relieved from a strain of suspense under which I have been labouring for a month past. To have refused my consent to Richard's marriage with Stella Ballantyne on no other grounds than that ocial prejudice forbade it would have seemed a complete, a stupendous reversal of my whole theory and conduct of life. I should have become an object of ridicule. People would have laughed at the philosopher of Little Beeding. I have heard their laughter all this month. Now, however, once the truth is known no one will be able to say——"

Henry Thresk looked up from his plate aghast.

"Do you mean to say, Mr. Hazlewood, that

after Mrs. Ballantyne has told her story you mean to make that story public?"

Mr. Hazlewood stared in amazement at Henry Thresk.

"But of course," he said.

"Oh, you can't be thinking of it!"

"But I am. I must do it. There is so much at stake," replied Hazlewood.

"What?"

"The whole consistency of my life. I must make it clear that I am not acting upon prejudice or suspicion or fear of what the world will say or for any of the conventional reasons which might guide other men."

To Thresk this point of view was horrible; and there was no arguing against it. It was inspired by the dreadful vanity of a narrow, shallow nature, and Thresk's experience had never shown him anything more difficult to combat and overcome.

"So for the sake of your reputation for consistency you will make a very unhappy woman bear shame and obloquy which she might easily be spared? You could find a thousand excuses for breaking off the marriage."

"You put the case very harshly, Mr. Thresk," said Hazlewood. "But you have not considered my position," and he went indignantly back to the library

Thresk shrugged his shoulders. After all if Dick Hazlewood turned his back upon Stella she would not hear the abuse or suffer the shame. That she would take the dark journey as she

declared he could not doubt. And no one could prevent her—not even he himself, though his heart might break at her taking it. All depended upon Dick

He appeared a few minutes afterwards fresh from his ride, glowing with good-humour and contentment. But the sight of Thresk surprised him.

"Hulloa," he cried. "Good-morning. I thought you were going to catch the eight forty-five."

"I felt lazy," answered Thresk. "I sent off some telegrams to put off my engagements."

"Good," said Dick, and he sat down at the breakfast-table. As he poured out a cup of tea, Thresk said:

"I think I heard you were over thirty."

"Yes."

"Thirty's a good age," said Thresk.

"It looks back on youth," answered Dick.

"That's just what I mean," remarked Thresk. "Do you mind a cigarette?"

"Not at all."

Thresk smoked and while he smoked he talked, not carelessly yet careful not to emphasise his case. "Youth is a graceful thing of high-sounding words and impetuous thoughts, but like many other graceful things it can be very hard and very cruel."

Dick Hazlewood looked closely and quickly at his companion. But he answered casually:

"It is supposed to be generous."

"And it is—to itself," replied Thresk. "Gener-

ous when its sympathies are enlisted, generous so long as all goes well with it: generous because it is confident of triumph. But its generosity is not a matter of judgment. It does not come from any wide outlook upon a world where there is a good deal to be said for everything. It is a matter of physical health."

"Yes?" said Dick.

"And once affronted, once hurt, youth finds it difficult to forgive."

So far both men had been debating on an abstract topic without any immediate application to themselves. But now Dick leaned across the table with a smile upon his face which Thresk did not understand.

"And why do you say this to me this morning, Mr. Thresk?" he asked pointedly.

"Yes, it's rather an impertinence, isn't it?" Thresk agreed. "But I was looking into a case late last night in which irrevocable and terrible things are going to happen if there is not forgiveness."

Dick took his cigarette-case from his pocket.

"I see," he remarked, and struck a match. Both men rose from the table and at the door Dick turned.

"Your case, of course, has not yet come on," he said.

"No," answered Thresk, "but it will very soon."

They went into the library, and Mr. Hazlewood greeted his son with a vivacity which for weeks had been absent from his demeanour.

"Did you ride this morning?" he asked.

"Yes, but Stella didn't. She sent word over that she was tired. I must go across and see how she is."

Mr. Hazlewood interposed quickly:

"There is no need of that, my boy; she is coming here this morning."

"Oh!"

Dick looked at his father in astonishment.

"She said no word of it to me last night—and I saw her home. I suppose she sent word over about that too?"

He looked from one to the other of his companions, but neither answered him. Some uneasiness indeed was apparent in them both.

"Oho!" he said with a smile. "Stella's coming over and I know nothing of it. Mr. Thresk's lazy, so remains at Little Beeding and delivers a lecture to me over breakfast. And you, father, seem in remarkable spirits."

Mr. Hazlewood seized upon the opportunity to interrupt his son's reflections.

"I am, my boy," he cried. "I walked in the fields this morning and——" But he got no further with his explanations, for the sound of Mrs. Pettifer's voice rang high in the hall and she burst into the room.

"Harold, I have only a moment. Good-morning, Mr. Thresk," she cried in a breath. "I have something to say to you."

Thresk was disturbed. Suppose that Stella came while Mrs. Pettifer was here! She must not

speak in Mrs. Pettifer's presence. Somehow Mrs. Pettifer must be dismissed. No such anxiety, however, harassed Mr. Hazlewood.

"Say it, Margaret," he said, smiling benignantly upon her. "You cannot annoy me this morning. I am myself again," and Dick's eyes turned sharply upon him. "All my old powers of observation have returned, my old interest in the great dark riddle of human life has re-awakened. The brain, the sedulous, active brain, resumes its work to-day asking questions, probing problems. I rose early, Margaret," he flourished his hands like one making a speech, "and walking in the fields amongst the cows a most curious speculation forced itself upon my mind. How is it, I asked myself——"

It seemed that Mr. Hazlewood was destined never to complete a sentence that morning, for Margaret Pettifer at this point banged her umbrella upon the floor.

"Stop talking, Harold, and listen to me! I have been speaking with Robert and we withdraw all opposition to Dick's marriage."

Mr. Hazlewood was dumfoundered.

"You, Margaret—you of all people!" he stammered.

"Yes," she replied decisively. "Robert likes her and Robert is a good judge of a woman. That's one thing. Then I believe Dick is going to take St. Quentins; isn't that so, Dick?"

"Yes," answered Dick. "That's the house we looked over yesterday."

"Well, it's not a couple of a hundred yards from

us, and it would not be comfortable for any of us if Dick and Dick's wife were strangers. So I give in. There, Dick!" She went across the room and held out her hand to him. "I am going to call on Stella this afternoon."

Dick flushed with pleasure.

"That's splendid, Aunt Margaret. I knew you were all right, you know. You put on a few frills at first, of course, but you are forgiven."

Mr. Hazlewood made so complete a picture of dismay that Dick could not but pity him. He went across to his father.

"Now, sir," he said, "let us hear this problem."

The old man was not proof against the invitation.

"You shall, Richard," he exclaimed. "You are the very man to hear it. Your aunt, Richard, is of too practical a mind for such speculations. It's a most curious problem. Hubbard quite failed to throw any light upon it. I myself am, I confess, bewildered. And I wonder if a fresh young mind can help us to a solution." He patted his son on the shoulder and then took him by the arm.

"The fresh young mind will have a go, father," said Dick. "Fire away."

"I was walking in the fields, my boy."

"Yes, sir, among the cows."

"Exactly, you put your finger on the very point. How is it, I asked myself——"

"That's quite your old style, father."

"Now isn't it, Richard, isn't it?" Mr. Hazlewood dropped Dick's arm. He warmed to his

theme. He caught fire. He assumed the attitude of the orator. "How is it that with the advancement of science and the progress of civilisation a cow gives no more milk to-day than she did at the beginning of the Christian era?"

With outspread arms he asked for an answer and the answer came.

"A fresh young mind can solve that problem in two shakes. It is because the laws of nature forbid. That's your trouble, father. That's the great drawback to sentimental enthusiasm. It's always up against the laws of nature."

"Dick," said Mrs. Pettifer, "by some extraordinary miracle you are gifted with common-sense. I am off." She went away in a hurricane as she had come, and it was time that she did go, for even while she was closing the door Stella Ballantyne came out from her cottage to cross the meadow. Dick was the first to hear the gate click as she unlatched it and passed into the garden. He took a step towards the window, but his father interposed and for once with a real authority.

"No, Richard," he said. "Wait with us here Mrs. Ballantyne has something to tell us."

"I thought so," said Dick quietly, and he came back to the other two men. "Let me understand." His face was grave but without anger or any confusion. "Stella returned here last night after I had taken her home?"

"Yes," said Thresk.

"To see you?"

"Yes."

"And my father came down and found you together?"

"Yes."

"I heard voices," Mr. Hazlewood hurriedly interposed, "and so naturally I came down."

Dick turned to his father.

"That's all right, father. I didn't think you were listening at the keyhole. I am not blaming anybody. I want to know exactly where we are —that's all."

Stella found the little group awaiting her, and standing up before them she told her story as she had told it last night to Thresk. She omitted nothing nor did she falter. She had trembled and cried for a great part of the night over the ordeal which lay before her, but now that she had come to it she was brave. Her composure indeed astonished Thresk and filled him with compassion. He knew that the very roots of her heart were bleeding. Only once or twice did she give any sign of what these few minutes were costing her. Her eyes strayed towards Dick Hazlewood's face in spite of herself, but she turned them away again with a wrench of her head and closed her eyelids lest she should hesitate and fail. All listened to her in silence, and it was strange to Thresk that the one man who seemed least concerned of the three was Dick Hazlewood himself. He watched Stella all the while she was speaking, but his face was a mask, not a gesture or movement gave a clue to his thoughts. When Stella had finished he asked composedly:

"Why didn't you tell me all this at the beginning, Stella?"

And now she turned to him in a burst of passion and remorse.

"Oh, Dick, I tried to tell you. I made up my mind so often that I would, but I never had the courage. I am terribly to blame. I hid it all from you—yes. But oh! you meant so much to me—you yourself, Dick. It wasn't your position. It wasn't what you brought with you, other people's friendship, other people's esteem. It was just you—you—you! I longed for you to want me, as I wanted you." Then she recovered herself and stopped. She was doing the very thing she had resolved not to do. She was pleading, she was making excuses. She drew herself up and with a dignity which was quite pitiful she now pleaded against herself.

"But I don't ask for your pity. You mustn't be merciful. I don't *want* mercy, Dick. That's of no use to me. I want to know what you think—just what you really and truthfully think—that's all. I can stand alone—if I must. Oh yes, I can stand alone." And as Thresk stirred and moved, knowing well in what way she meant to stand alone, Stella turned her eyes full upon him in warning, nay, in menace. "I can stand alone quite easily, Dick. You mustn't think that I should suffer so very much. I shouldn't! I shouldn't——"

In spite of her control a sob broke from her throat and her bosom heaved; and then Dick

Hazlewood went quietly to her side and took her hand.

"I didn't interrupt you, Stella. I wanted you to tell everything now, once for all, so that no one of us three need ever mention a word of it again."

Stella looked at Dick Hazlewood in wonder, and then a light broke over her face like the morning. His arm slipped about her waist and she leaned against him suddenly weak, almost to swooning. Mr. Hazlewood started up from his chair in consternation.

"But you heard her, Richard!"

"Yes, father, I heard her," he answered. "But you see Stella is my wife."

"Your——" Mr. Hazlewood's lips refused to speak the word. He fell back again in his chair and dropped his face in his hands. "Oh, no!"

"It's true," said Dick. "I have rooms in London, you know. I went to London last week. Stella came up on Monday. It was my doing, my wish. Stella is my wife."

Mr. Hazlewood groaned aloud.

"But she has tricked you, Richard," and Stella agreed.

"Yes, I tricked you, Dick. I did," she said miserably, and she drew herself from his arm. But he caught her hand.

"No, you didn't." He led her over to his father. "That's where you both make your mistake. Stella tried to tell me something on the very night when we walked back from this house to her cottage and I asked her to marry me. She has

tried again often during the last weeks. I knew very well what it was—before you turned against her before I married her. She didn't trick me."

Mr. Hazlewood turned in despair to Henry Thresk.

"What do you say?" he asked.

"That I am very glad you asked me here to give my advice on your collection," Thresk answered "I was inclined yesterday to take a different view of your invitation. But I did what perhaps I may suggest that you should do: I accepted the situation."

He went across to Stella and took her hand.

"Oh, thank you," she cried, "thank you."

"And now"—Thresk turned to Dick—"if I might look at a *Bradshaw* I could find out the next train to London."

"Certainly," said Dick, and he went over to the writing-table. Stella and Henry Thresk were left alone for a moment.

"We shall see you again," she said. "Please!"

Thresk laughed.

"No doubt. I am not going out into the night. You know my address. If you don't ask Mr. Hazlewood. It's in King's Bench Walk, isn't it?" And he took the time-table from Dick Hazlewood's hand.

THE END

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