CHAPTER XVI

THE PARTICULAR INCIDENT

Betty Vanderpoel's walk back to Stornham did not, long though it was, give her time to follow to its end the thread of her thoughts. Mentally she walked again with her uncommunicative guide, through woodpaths and gardens, and stood gazing at the great blind-faced house. She had not given the man more than an occasional glance until he had told her his name. She had been too much absorbed, too much moved, by what she had been seeing. She wondered, if she had been more aware of him, whether his face would have revealed a great deal. She believed it would not. He had made himself outwardly stolid. But the thing must have been bitter. To him the whole story of the splendid past was familiar even if through his own life he had looked on only at gradual decay. There must be stories enough of men and women who had lived in the place, of what they had done, of how they had loved, of what they had counted for in their country's wars and peacemakings, great functions and law-building. To be able to look back through centuries and know of one's blood that sometimes it had been shed in the doing of great deeds, must be a thing to remember. To realise that the courage and honour had been lost in ignoble modern vices, which no sense of dignity and reverence for race and name had restrained--must be bitter--bitter! And in the role of a servant to lead a stranger about among the ruins of what had been--that must have been bitter, too. For a moment Betty felt the bitterness of it herself and her red mouth took upon itself a grim line. The worst of it for him was that he was not of that strain of his race who had been the "bad lot." The "bad lot" had been the weak lot, the vicious, the self-degrading. Scandals which had shut men out from their class and kind were usually of an ugly type. This man had a strong jaw, a powerful, healthy body, and clean, though perhaps hard, eyes. The First Man of them, who hewed his way to the front, who stood fierce in the face of things, who won the first lands and laid the first stones, might have been like him in build and look.

"It's a disgusting thing," she said to herself, "to think of the corrupt weaklings the strong ones dwindled down to. I hate them. So does he."

There had been many such of late years, she knew. She had seen them in Paris, in Rome, even in New York. Things with thin or over-thick bodies and receding chins and foreheads; things haunting places of amusement and finding inordinate entertainment in strange jokes and horseplay. She herself had hot blood and a fierce strength of rebellion, and she was wondering how, if the father and elder brother had been the "bad lot," he had managed to stand still, looking on, and keeping his hands off them.

The last gold of the sun was mellowing the grey stone of the terrace and enriching the green of the weeds thrusting themselves into life between the uneven flags when she reached Stornham, and passing through the house found Lady Anstruthers sitting there. In sustenance of her effort to keep up appearances, she had put on a weird little muslin dress and had elaborated the dressing of her thin hair. It was no longer dragged back straight from her face, and she looked a trifle less abject, even a shade prettier. Bettina sat upon the edge of the balustrade and touched the hair with light fingers, ruffling it a little becomingly.

"If you had worn it like this yesterday," she said, "I should have known you."

"Should you, Betty? I never look into a mirror if I can help it, but when I do I never know myself. The thing that stares back at me with its pale eyes is not Rosy. But, of course, everyone grows old."

"Not now! People are just discovering how to grow young instead."

Lady Anstruthers looked into the clear courage of her laughing eyes.

"Somehow," she said, "you say strange things in such a way that one feels as if they must be true, however--however unlike anything else they are."

"They are not as new as they seem," said Betty. "Ancient philosophers said things like them centuries ago, but people did not believe them. We are just beginning to drag them out of the dust and furbish them up and pretend they are ours, just as people rub up and adorn themselves with jewels dug out of excavations."

"In America people think so many new things," said poor little Lady Anstruthers with yearning humbleness.

"The whole civilised world is thinking what you call new things," said Betty. "The old ones won't do. They have been tried, and though they have helped us to the place we have reached, they cannot help us any farther. We must begin again."

"It is such a long time since I began," said Rosy, "such a long time."

"Then there must be another beginning for you, too. The hour has struck."

Lady Anstruthers rose with as involuntary a movement as if a strong hand had drawn her to her feet. She stood facing Betty, a pathetic little figure in her washed-out muslin frock and with her washed-out face and eyes and being, though on her faded cheeks a flush was rising.

"Oh, Betty!" she said, "I don't know what there is about you, but there is something which makes one feel as if you believed everything and could do everything, and as if one believes YOU. Whatever you were to say, you would make it seem TRUE. If you said the wildest thing in the world I should BELIEVE you."

Betty got up, too, and there was an extraordinary steadiness in her eyes.

"You may," she answered. "I shall never say one thing to you which is not a truth, not one single thing."

"I believe that," said Rosy Anstruthers, with a quivering mouth. "I do believe it so."

"I walked to Mount Dunstan," Betty said later.

"Really?" said Rosy. "There and back?"

"Yes, and all round the park and the gardens."

Rosy looked rather uncertain.

"Weren't you a little afraid of meeting someone?"

"I did meet someone. At first I took him for a gamekeeper. But he turned out to be Lord Mount Dunstan."

Lady Anstruthers gasped.

"What did he do?" she exclaimed. "Did he look angry at seeing a stranger? They say he is so ill-tempered and rude."

"I should feel ill-tempered if I were in his place," said Betty. "He has enough to rouse his evil passions and make him savage. What a fate for a man with any sense and decency of feeling! What fools and criminals the last generation of his house must have produced! I wonder how such things evolve themselves. But he is different--different. One can see it. If he had a chance--just half a chance--he would build it all up again. And I don't mean merely the place, but all that one means when one says 'his house.'"

"He would need a great deal of money," sighed Lady Anstruthers.

Betty nodded slowly as she looked out, reflecting, into the park.

"Yes, it would require money," was her admission.

"And he has none," Lady Anstruthers added. "None whatever."

"He will get some," said Betty, still reflecting. "He will make it, or dig it up, or someone will leave it to him. There is a great deal of money in the world, and when a strong creature ought to have some of it he gets it."

"Oh, Betty!" said Rosy. "Oh, Betty!"

"Watch that man," said Betty; "you will see. It will come."

Lady Anstruthers' mind, working at no time on complex lines, presented her with a simple modern solution.

"Perhaps he will marry an American," she said, and saying it, sighed again.

"He will not do it on purpose." Bettina answered slowly and with such an air of absence of mind that Rosy laughed a little.

"Will he do it accidentally, or against his will?" she said.

Betty herself smiled.

"Perhaps he will," she said. "There are Englishmen who rather dislike Americans. I think he is one of them."

It apparently became necessary for Lady Anstruthers, a moment later, to lean upon the stone balustrade and pick off a young leaf or so, for no reason whatever, unless that in doing so she averted her look from her sister as she made her next remark.

"Are you--when are you going to write to father and mother?"

"I have written," with unembarrassed evenness of tone. "Mother will be counting the days."

"Mother!" Rosy breathed, with a soft little gasp. "Mother!" and turned her face farther away. "What did you tell her?"

Betty moved over to her and stood close at her side. The power of her personality enveloped the tremulous creature as if it had been a sense of warmth.

"I told her how beautiful the place was, and how Ughtred adored you--and how you loved us all, and longed to see New York again."

The relief in the poor little face was so immense that Betty's heart shook before it. Lady Anstruthers looked up at her with adoring eyes.

"I might have known," she said; "I might have known that--that you would only say the right thing. You couldn't say the wrong thing, Betty."

Betty bent over her and spoke almost yearningly.

"Whatever happens," she said, "we will take care that mother is not hurt. She's too kind--she's too good--she's too tender."

"That is what I have remembered," said Lady Anstruthers brokenly. "She used to hold me on her lap when I was quite grown up. Oh! her soft, warm arms--her warm shoulder! I have so wanted her."

"She has wanted you," Betty answered. "She thinks of you just as she did when she held you on her lap."

"But if she saw me now--looking like this! If she saw me! Sometimes I have even been glad to think she never would."

"She will." Betty's tone was cool and clear. "But before she does I shall have made you look like yourself."

Lady Anstruthers' thin hand closed on her plucked leaves convulsively, and then opening let them drop upon the stone of the terrace.

"We shall never see each other. It wouldn't be possible," she said. "And there is no magic in the world now, Betty. You can't bring back----"

"Yes, you can," said Bettina. "And what used to be called magic is only the controlled working of the law and order of things in these days. We must talk it all over."

Lady Anstruthers became a little pale.

"What?" she asked, low and nervously, and Betty saw her glance sideways at the windows of the room which opened on to the terrace.

Betty took her hand and drew her down into a chair. She sat near her and looked her straight in the face.

"Don't be frightened," she said. "I tell you there is no need to be frightened. We are not living in the Middle Ages. There is a policeman even in Stornham village, and we are within four hours of London, where there are thousands."

Lady Anstruthers tried to laugh, but did not succeed very well, and her forehead flushed.

"I don't quite know why I seem so nervous," she said. "It's very silly of me."

She was still timid enough to cling to some rag of pretence, but Betty knew that it would fall away. She did the wisest possible thing, which was to make an apparently impersonal remark.

"I want you to go over the place with me and show me everything. Walls and fences and greenhouses and outbuildings must not be allowed to crumble away."

"What?" cried Rosy. "Have you seen all that already?" She actually stared at her. "How practical and--and American!"

"To see that a wall has fallen when you find yourself obliged to walk round a pile of grass-grown brickwork?" said Betty.

Lady Anstruthers still softly stared.

"What--what are you thinking of?" she asked.

"Thinking that it is all too beautiful----" Betty's look swept the loveliness spread about her, "too beautiful and too valuable to be allowed to lose its value and its beauty." She turned her eyes back to Rosy and the deep dimple near her mouth showed itself delightfully. "It is a throwing away of capital," she added.

"Oh!" cried Lady Anstruthers, "how clever you are! And you look so different, Betty."

"Do I look stupid?" the dimple deepening. "I must try to alter that."

"Don't try to alter your looks," said Rosy. "It is your looks that make you so--so wonderful. But usually women--girls----" Rosy paused.

"Oh, I have been trained," laughed Betty. "I am the spoiled daughter of a business man of genius. His business is an art and a science. I have had advantages. He has let me hear him talk. I even know some trifling things about stocks. Not enough to do me vital injury--but something. What I know best of all,"--her laugh ended and her eyes changed their look,--"is that it is a blunder to think that beauty is not capital--that happiness is not--and that both are not the greatest assets in the scheme. This," with a wave of her hand, taking in all they saw, "is beauty, and it ought to be happiness, and it must be taken care of. It is your home and Ughtred's----"

"It is Nigel's," put in Rosy.

"It is entailed, isn't it?" turning quickly. "He cannot sell it?"

"If he could we should not be sitting here," ruefully.

"Then he cannot object to its being rescued from ruin."

"He will object to--to money being spent on things he does not care for." Lady Anstruthers' voice lowered itself, as it always did when she spoke of her husband, and she indulged in the involuntary hasty glance about her.

"I am going to my room to take off my hat," Betty said. "Will you come with me?"

She went into the house, talking quietly of ordinary things, and in this way they mounted the stairway together and passed along the gallery which led to her room. When they entered it she closed the door, locked it, and, taking off her hat, laid it aside. After doing which she sat.

"No one can hear and no one can come in," she said. "And if they could, you are afraid of things you need not be afraid of now. Tell me what happened when you were so ill after Ughtred was born."

"You guessed that it happened then," gasped Lady Anstruthers.

"It was a good time to make anything happen," replied Bettina. "You were prostrated, you were a child, and felt yourself cast off hopelessly from the people who loved you."

"Forever! Forever!" Lady Anstruthers' voice was a sharp little moan. "That was what I felt--that nothing could ever help me. I dared not write things. He told me he would not have it--that he would stop any hysterical complaints--that his mother could testify that he behaved perfectly to me. She was the only person in the room with us when--when----"

"When?" said Betty.

Lady Anstruthers shuddered. She leaned forward and caught Betty's hand between her own shaking ones.

"He struck me! He struck me! He said it never happened--but it did--it did! Betty, it did! That was the one thing that came back to me clearest. He said that I was in delirious hysterics, and that I had struggled with his mother and himself, because they tried to keep me quiet, and prevent the servants hearing. One awful day he brought Lady Anstruthers into the room, and they stood over me, as I lay in bed, and she fixed her eyes on me and said that she--being an Englishwoman, and a person whose word would be believed, could tell people the truth--my father and mother, if necessary, that my spoiled, hysterical American tempers had created unhappiness for me--merely because I was bored by life in the country and wanted excitement. I tried to answer, but they would not let me, and when I began to shake all over, they said that I was throwing myself into hysterics again. And they told the doctor so, and he believed it."

The possibilities of the situation were plainly to be seen. Fate, in the form of temperament itself, had been against her. It was clear enough to Betty as she patted and stroked the thin hands. "I understand. Tell me the rest," she said.

Lady Anstruthers' head dropped.

"When I was loneliest, and dying of homesickness, and so weak that I could not speak without sobbing, he came to me--it was one morning after I had been lying awake all night--and he began to seem kinder. He had not been near me for two days, and I had thought I was going to be left to die alone--and mother would never know. He said he had been reflecting and that he was afraid that we had misunderstood each other--because we belonged to different countries, and had been brought up in different ways----" she paused.

"And that if you understood his position and considered it, you might both be quite happy," Betty gave in quiet termination.

Lady Anstruthers started.

"Oh, you know it all!" she exclaimed

"Only because I have heard it before. It is an old trick. And because he seemed kind and relenting, you tried to understand--and signed something."

"I WANTED to understand. I WANTED to believe. What did it matter which of us had the money, if we liked each other and were happy? He told me things about the estate, and about the enormous cost of it, and his bad luck, and debts he could not help. And I said that I would do anything if--if we could only be like mother and father. And he kissed me and I signed the paper."

"And then?"

"He went to London the next day, and then to Paris. He said he was obliged to go on business. He was away a month. And after a week had passed, Lady Anstruthers began to be restless and angry, and once she flew into a rage, and told me I was a fool, and that if I had been an Englishwoman, I should have had some decent control over my husband, because he would have respected me. In time I found out what I had done. It did not take long."

"The paper you signed," said Betty, "gave him control over your money?"

A forlorn nod was the answer.

"And since then he has done as he chose, and he has not chosen to care for Stornham. And once he made you write to father, to ask for more money?"

"I did it once. I never would do it again. He has tried to make me. He always says it is to save Stornham for Ughtred."

"Nothing can take Stornham from Ughtred. It may come to him a ruin, but it will come to him."

"He says there are legal points I cannot understand. And he says he is spending money on it."

"Where?"

"He--doesn't go into that. If I were to ask questions, he would make me know that I had better stop. He says I know nothing about things. And he is right. He has never allowed me to know and--and I am not like you, Betty."

"When you signed the paper, you did not realise that you were doing something you could never undo and that you would be forced to submit to the consequences?"

"I--I didn't realise anything but that it would kill me to live as I had been living--feeling as if they hated me. And I was so glad and thankful that he seemed kinder. It was as if I had been on the rack, and he turned the screws back, and I was ready to do anything--anything--if I might be taken off. Oh, Betty! you know, don't you, that--that if he would only have been a little kind--just a little--I would have obeyed him always, and given him everything."

Betty sat and looked at her, with deeply pondering eyes. She was confronting the fact that it seemed possible that one must build a new soul for her as well as a new body. In these days of science and growing sanity of thought, one did not stand helpless before the problem of physical rebuilding, and--and perhaps, if one could pour life into a creature, the soul of it would respond, and wake again, and grow.

"You do not know where he is?" she said aloud. "You absolutely do not know?"

"I never know exactly," Lady Anstruthers answered. "He was here for a few days the week before you came. He said he was going abroad. He might appear to-morrow, I might not hear of him for six months. I can't help hoping now that it will be the six months."

"Why particularly now?" inquired Betty.

Lady Anstruthers flushed and looked shy and awkward.

"Because of--you. I don't know what he would say. I don't know what he would do."

"To me?" said Betty.

"It would be sure to be something unreasonable and wicked," said Lady Anstruthers. "It would, Betty."

"I wonder what it would be?" Betty said musingly.

"He has told lies for years to keep you all from me. If he came now, he would know that he had been found out. He would say that I had told you things. He would be furious because you have seen what there is to see. He would know that you could not help but realise that the money he made me ask for had not been spent on the estate. He,--Betty, he would try to force you to go away."

"I wonder what he would do?" Betty said again musingly. She felt interested, not afraid.

"It would be something cunning," Rosy protested. "It would be something no one could expect. He might be so rude that you could not remain in the room with him, or he might be quite polite, and pretend he was rather glad to see you. If he was only frightfully rude we should be safer, because that would not be an unexpected thing, but if he was polite, it would be because he was arranging something hideous, which you could not defend yourself against."

"Can you tell me," said Betty quite slowly, because, as she looked down at the carpet, she was thinking very hard, "the kind of unexpected thing he has done to you?" Lifting her eyes, she saw that a troubled flush was creeping over Lady Anstruthers' face.

"There--have been--so many queer things," she faltered. Then Betty knew there was some special thing she was afraid to talk about, and that if she desired to obtain illuminating information it would be well to go into the matter.

"Try," she said, "to remember some particular incident."

Lady Anstruthers looked nervous.

"Rosy," in the level voice, "there has been a particular incident--and I would rather hear of it from you than from him."

Rosy's lap held little shaking hands.

"He has held it over me for years," she said breathlessly. "He said he would write about it to father and mother. He says he could use it against me as evidence in--in the divorce court. He says that divorce courts in America are for women, but in England they are for men, and--he could defend himself against me."

The incongruity of the picture of the small, faded creature arraigned in a divorce court on charges of misbehaviour would have made Betty smile if she had been in smiling mood.

"What did he accuse you of?"

"That was the--the unexpected thing," miserably.

Betty took the unsteady hands firmly in her own.

"Don't be afraid to tell me," she said. "He knew you so well that he understood what would terrify you the most. I know you so well that I understand how he does it. Did he do this unexpected thing just before you wrote to father for the money?" As she quite suddenly presented the question, Rosy exclaimed aloud.

"How did you know?" she said. "You--you are like a lawyer. How could you know?"

How simple she was! How obviously an easy prey! She had been unconsciously giving evidence with every word.

"I have been thinking him over," Betty said. "He interests me. I have begun to guess that he always wants something when he professes that he has a grievance."

Then with drooping head, Rosy told the story.

"Yes, it happened before he made me write to father for so much money. The vicar was ill and was obliged to go away for six months. The clergyman who came to take his place was a young man. He was kind and gentle, and wanted to help people. His mother was with him and she was like him. They loved each other, and they were quite poor. His name was Ffolliott. I liked to hear him preach. He said things that comforted me. Nigel found out that he comforted me, and--when he called here, he was more polite to him than he had ever been to Mr. Brent. He seemed almost as if he liked him. He actually asked him to dinner two or three times. After dinner, he would go out of the room and leave us together. Oh, Betty!" clinging to her hands, "I was so wretched then, that sometimes I thought I was going out of my mind. I think I looked wild. I used to kneel down and try to pray, and I could not."

"Yes, yes," said Betty.

"I used to feel that if I could only have one friend, just one, I could bear it better. Once I said something like that to Nigel. He only shrugged his shoulders and sneered when I said it. But afterwards I knew he had remembered. One evening, when he had asked Mr. Ffolliott to dinner, he led him to talk about religion. Oh, Betty! It made my blood turn cold when he began. I knew he was doing it for some wicked reason. I knew the look in his eyes and the awful, agreeable smile on his mouth. When he said at last, 'If you could help my poor wife to find comfort in such things,' I began to see. I could not explain to anyone how he did it, but with just a sentence, dropped here and there, he seemed to tell the whole story of a silly, selfish, American girl, thwarted in her vulgar little ambitions, and posing as a martyr, because she could not have her own way in everything. He said once, quite casually, 'I'm afraid American women are rather spoiled.' And then he said, in the same tolerant way--'A poor man is a disappointment to an American girl. America does not believe in rank combined with lack of fortune.' I dared not defend myself. I am not clever enough to think of the right things to say. He meant Mr. Ffolliott to understand that I had married him because I thought he was grand and rich, and that I was a disappointed little spiteful shrew. I tried to act as if he was not hurting me, but my hands trembled, and a lump kept rising in my throat. When we returned to the drawing-room, and at last he left us together, I was praying and praying that I might be able to keep from breaking down."

She stopped and swallowed hard. Betty held her hands firmly until she went on.

"For a few minutes, I sat still, and tried to think of some new subject--something about the church or the village. But I could not begin to speak because of the lump in my throat. And then, suddenly, but quietly, Mr. Ffolliott got up. And though I dared not lift my eyes, I knew he was standing before the fire, quite near me. And, oh! what do you think he said, as low and gently as if his voice was a woman's. I did not know that people ever said such things now, or even thought them. But never, never shall I forget that strange minute. He said just this:

"'God will help you. He will. He will.'

"As if it was true, Betty! As if there was a God--and--He had not forgotten me. I did not know what I was doing, but I put out my hand and caught at his sleeve, and when I looked up into his face, I saw in his kind, good eyes, that he knew--that somehow--God knows how--he understood and that I need not utter a word to explain to him that he had been listening to lies."

"Did you talk to him?" Betty asked quietly.

"He talked to me. We did not even speak of Nigel. He talked to me as I had never heard anyone talk before. Somehow he filled the room with something real, which was hope and comfort and like warmth, which kept my soul from shivering. The tears poured from my eyes at first, but the lump in my throat went away, and when Nigel came back I actually did not feel frightened, though he looked at me and sneered quietly."

"Did he say anything afterwards?"

"He laughed a little cold laugh and said, 'I see you have been seeking the consolation of religion. Neurotic women like confessors. I do not object to your confessing, if you confess your own backslidings and not mine.'"

"That was the beginning," said Betty speculatively. "The unexpected thing was the end. Tell me the rest?"

"No one could have dreamed of it," Rosy broke forth. "For weeks he was almost like other people. He stayed at Stornham and spent his days in shooting. He professed that he was rather enjoying himself in a dull way. He encouraged me to go to the vicarage, he invited the Ffolliotts here. He said Mrs. Ffolliott was a gentlewoman and good for me. He said it was proper that I should interest myself in parish work. Once or twice he even brought some little message to me from Mr. Ffolliott."

It was a pitiably simple story. Betty saw, through its relation, the unconsciousness of the easily allured victim, the adroit leading on from step to step, the ordinary, natural, seeming method which arranged opportunities. The two had been thrown together at the Court, at the vicarage, the church and in the village, and the hawk had looked on and bided his time. For the first time in her years of exile, Rosy had begun to feel that she might be allowed a friend--though she lived in secret tremor lest the normal liberty permitted her should suddenly be snatched away.

"We never talked of Nigel," she said, twisting her hands. "But he made me begin to live again. He talked to me of Something that watched and would not leave me--would never leave me. I was learning to believe it. Sometimes when I walked through the wood to the village, I used to stop among the trees and look up at the bits of sky between the branches, and listen to the sound in the leaves--the sound that never stops--and it seemed as if it was saying something to me. And I would clasp my hands and whisper, 'Yes, yes,' 'I will,' 'I will.' I used to see Nigel looking at me at table with a queer smile in his eyes and once he said to me--'You are growing young and lovely, my dear. Your colour is improving. The counsels of our friend are of a salutary nature.' It would have made me nervous, but he said it almost good-naturedly, and I was silly enough even to wonder if it could be possible that he was pleased to see me looking less ill. It was true, Betty, that I was growing stronger. But it did not last long."

"I was afraid not," said Betty.

"An old woman in the lane near Bartyon Wood was ill. Mr. Ffolliott had asked me to go to see her, and I used to go. She suffered a great deal and clung to us both. He comforted her, as he comforted me. Sometimes when he was called away he would send a note to me, asking me to go to her. One day he wrote hastily, saying that she was dying, and asked if I would go with him to her cottage at once. I knew it would save time if

I met him in the path which was a short cut. So I wrote a few words and gave them to the messenger. I said, 'Do not come to the house. I will meet you in Bartyon Wood.'"

Betty made a slight movement, and in her face there was a dawning of mingled amazement and incredulity. The thought which had come to her seemed--as Ughtred's locking of the door had seemed--too wild for modern days.

Lady Anstruthers saw her expression and understood it. She made a hopeless gesture with her small, bony hand.

"Yes," she said, "it is just like that. No one would believe it. The worst cleverness of the things he does, is that when one tells of them, they sound like lies. I have a bewildered feeling that I should not believe them myself if I had not seen them. He met the boy in the park and took the note from him. He came back to the house and up to my room, where I was dressing quickly to go to Mr. Ffolliott."

She stopped for quite a minute, rather as if to recover breath.

"He closed the door behind him and came towards me with the note in his hand. And I saw in a second the look that always terrifies me, in his face. He had opened the note and he smoothed out the paper quietly and said, 'What is this. I could not help it--I turned cold and began to shiver. I could not imagine what was coming."

"'Is it my note to Mr. Ffolliott?' I asked.

"'Yes, it is your note to Mr. Ffolliott,' and he read it aloud. "Do not come to the house. I will meet you in Bartyon Wood." That is a nice note for a man's wife to have written, to be picked up and read by a stranger, if your confessor is not cautious in the matter of letters from women----'

"When he begins a thing in that way, you may always know that he has planned everything--that you can do nothing--I always know. I knew then, and I knew I was quite white when I answered him:

"'I wrote it in a great hurry, Mrs. Farne is worse. We are going together to her. I said I would meet him--to save time.'

"He laughed, his awful little laugh, and touched the paper.

"'I have no doubt. And I have no doubt that if other persons saw this, they would believe it. It is very likely.

"'But you believe it,' I said. 'You know it is true. No one would be so silly--so silly and wicked as to----' Then I broke down and cried out. 'What do you mean? What could anyone think it meant?' I was so wild that I felt as if I was going crazy. He clenched my wrist and shook me.

"'Don't think you can play the fool with me,' he said. 'I have been watching this thing from the first. The first time I leave you alone with the fellow, I come back to find you have been giving him an emotional scene. Do you suppose your simpering good spirits and your imbecile pink cheeks told me nothing? They told me exactly this. I have waited to come upon it, and here it is. "Do not come to the house--I will meet you in the wood."'

"That was the unexpected thing. It was no use to argue and try to explain. I knew he did not believe what he was saying, but he worked himself into a rage, he accused me of awful things, and called me awful names in a loud voice, so that he could be heard, until I was dumb and staggering. All the time, I knew there was a reason, but I could not tell then what it was. He said at last, that he was going to Mr. Ffolliott. He said, 'I will meet him in the wood and I will take your note with me.'

"Betty, it was so shameful that I fell down on my knees. 'Oh, don't--don't--do that,' I said. 'I beg of you, Nigel. He is a gentleman and a clergyman. I beg and beg of you. If you will not, I will do anything--anything.' And at that minute I remembered how he had tried to make me write to father for money. And I cried out--catching at his coat, and holding him back. 'I will write to father as you asked me. I will do anything. I can't bear it.'"

"That was the whole meaning of the whole thing," said Betty with eyes ablaze. "That was the beginning, the middle and the end. What did he say?"

"He pretended to be made more angry. He said, 'Don't insult me by trying to bribe me with your vulgar money. Don't insult me.' But he gradually grew sulky instead of raging, and though he put the note in his pocket, he did not go to Mr. Ffolliott. And--I wrote to father."

"I remember that," Betty answered. "Did you ever speak to Mr. Ffolliott again?"

"He guessed--he knew--I saw it in his kind, brown eyes when he passed me without speaking, in the village. I daresay the villagers were told about the awful thing by some servant, who heard Nigel's voice. Villagers always know what is happening. He went away a few weeks later. The day before he went, I had walked through the wood, and just outside it, I met him. He stopped for one minute--just one--he lifted his hat and said, just as he had spoken them that first night--just the same words, 'God will help you. He will. He will.'"

A strange, almost unearthly joy suddenly flashed across her face.

"It must be true," she said. "It must be true. He has sent you, Betty. It has been a long time--it has been so long that sometimes I have forgotten his words. But you have come!"

"Yes, I have come," Betty answered. And she bent forward and kissed her gently, as if she had been soothing a child.

There were other questions to ask. She was obliged to ask them. "The unexpected thing" had been used as an instrument for years. It was always efficacious. Over the yearningly homesick creature had hung the threat that her father and mother, those she ached and longed for, could be told the story in such a manner as would brand her as a woman with a shameful secret. How could she explain herself? There were the awful, written words. He was her husband. He was remorseless, plausible. She dared not write freely. She had no witnesses to call upon. She had discovered that he had planned with composed steadiness that misleading impressions should be given to servants and village people. When the Brents returned to the vicarage, she had observed, with terror, that for some reason they stiffened, and looked askance when the Ffolliotts were mentioned.

"I am afraid, Lady Anstruthers, that Mr. Ffolliott was a great mistake," Mrs. Brent said once.

Lady Anstruthers had not dared to ask any questions. She had felt the awkward colour rising in her face and had known that she looked guilty. But if she had protested against the injustice of the remark, Sir Nigel would have heard of her words before the day had passed, and she shuddered to think of the result. He had by that time reached the point of referring to Ffolliott with sneering lightness, as "Your lover."

"Do you defend your lover to me," he had said on one occasion, when she had entered a timid protest. And her white face and wild helpless eyes had been such evidence as to the effect the word had produced, that he had seen the expediency of making a point of using it.

The blood beat in Betty Vanderpoel's veins.

"Rosy," she said, looking steadily in the faded face, "tell me this. Did you never think of getting away from him, of going somewhere, and trying to reach father, by cable, or letter, by some means?"

Lady Anstruthers' weary and wrinkled little smile was a pitiably illuminating thing.

"My dear" she said, "if you are strong and beautiful and rich and well dressed, so that people care to look at you, and listen to what you say, you can do things. But who, in England, will listen to a shabby, dowdy, frightened woman, when she runs away from her husband, if he follows her and tells people she is hysterical or mad or bad? It is the shabby, dowdy woman who is in the wrong. At first, I thought of nothing else but trying to get away. And once I went to Stornham station. I walked all the way, on a hot day. And just as I was getting into a third-class carriage, Nigel marched in and caught my arm, and held me back. I fainted and when I came to myself I was in the carriage, being driven back to the Court, and he was sitting opposite to me. He said, 'You fool! It would take a cleverer woman than you to carry that out.' And I knew it was the awful truth."

"It is not the awful truth now," said Betty, and she rose to her feet and stood looking before her, but with a look which did not rest on chairs and tables. She remained so, standing for a few moments of dead silence.

"What a fool he was!" she said at last. "And what a villain! But a villain is always a fool."

She bent, and taking Rosy's face between her hands, kissed it with a kiss which seemed like a seal. "That will do," she said. "Now I know. One must know what is in one's hands and what is not. Then one need not waste time in talking of miserable things. One can save one's strength for doing what can be done."

"I believe you would always think about DOING things," said Lady Anstruthers. "That is American, too."

"It is a quality Americans inherited from England," lightly; "one of the results of it is that England covers a rather large share of the map of the world. It is a practical quality. You and I might spend hours in talking to each other of what Nigel has done and what you have done, of what he has said, and of what you have said. We might give some hours, I daresay, to what the Dowager did and said. But wiser people than we are have found out that thinking of black things past is living them again, and it is like poisoning one's blood. It is deterioration of property."

She said the last words as if she had ended with a jest. But she knew what she was doing.

"You were tricked into giving up what was yours, to a person who could not be trusted. What has been done with it, scarcely matters. It is not yours, but Sir Nigel's. But we are not helpless, because we have in our hands the most powerful material agent in the world.

"Come, Rosy, and let us walk over the house. We will begin with that."