CHAPTER XXXI

NO, SHE WOULD NOT

Sir Nigel did not invite Rosalie to accompany them, when the next morning, after breakfast, he reminded Betty of his suggestion of the night before, that she should walk over the place with him, and show him what had been done. He preferred to make his study of his sister-in-law undisturbed.

There was no detail whose significance he missed as they went about together. He had keen eyes and was a quite sufficiently practical person on such matters as concerned his own interests. In this case it was to his interest to make up his mind as to what he might gain or lose by the appearance of his wife's family. He did not mean to lose--if it could be helped--anything either of personal importance or material benefit. And it could only be helped by his comprehending clearly what he had to deal with. Betty was, at present, the chief factor in the situation, and he was sufficiently astute to see that she might not be easy to read.
His personal theories concerning women presented to him two or three effective ways of managing them. You made love to them, you flattered them either subtly or grossly, you roughly or smoothly bullied them, or you harrowed them with haughty indifference--if your love-making had produced its proper effect--when it was necessary to lure or drive or trick them into submission. Women should be made useful in one way or another. Little fool as she was, Rosalie had been useful. He had, after

all was said and done, had some comparatively easy years as the result of her existence. But she had not been useful enough, and there had even been moments when he had wondered if he had made a mistake in separating her entirely from her family. There might have been more to be gained if he had allowed them to visit her and had played the part of a devoted husband in their presence. A great bore, of course, but they could not have spent their entire lives at Stornham. Twelve years ago, however, he had known very little of Americans, and he had lost his temper. He was really very fond of his temper, and rather enjoyed referring to it with tolerant regret as being a bad one and beyond his control--with a manner which suggested that the attribute was the inevitable result of strength of character and masculine spirit. The luxury of giving way to it was a great one, and it was exasperating as he walked about with this handsome girl to find himself beginning to suspect that, where she was concerned, some self-control might be necessary. He was led to this thought because the things he took in on all sides could only have been achieved by a person whose mind was a steadily-balanced thing. In one's treatment of such a creature, methods must be well chosen. The crudest had sufficed to overwhelm Rosalie. He tried two or three little things as experiments during their walk.

The first was to touch with dignified pathos on the subject of Ughtred. Betty, he intimated gently, could imagine what a man's grief and disappointment might be on finding his son and heir deformed in such a manner. The delicate reserve with which he managed to convey his fear

that Rosalie's own uncontrolled hysteric attacks had been the cause of the misfortune was very well done. She had, of course, been very young and much spoiled, and had not learned self-restraint, poor girl.

It was at this point that Betty first realised a certain hideous thing. She must actually remain silent--there would be at the outset many times when she could only protect her sister by refraining from either denial or argument. If she turned upon him now with refutation, it was Rosy who would be called upon to bear the consequences. He would go at once to Rosy, and she herself would have done what she had said she would not do--she would have brought trouble upon the poor girl before she was strong enough to bear it. She suspected also that his intention was to discover how much she had heard, and if she might be goaded into betraying her attitude in the matter.

But she was not to be so goaded. He watched her closely and her very colour itself seemed to be under her own control. He had expected--if she had heard hysteric, garbled stories from his wife--to see a flame of scarlet leap up on the cheek he was admiring. There was no such leap, which was baffling in itself. Could it be that experience had taught Rosalie the discretion of keeping her mouth shut?

"I am very fond of Ughtred," was the sole comment he was granted. "We made friends from the first. As he grows older and stronger, his misfortune may be less apparent. He will be a very clever man."

"He will be a very clever man if he is at all like----" He checked himself with a slight movement of his shoulders. "I was going to say a thing utterly banal. I beg your pardon. I forgot for the moment that I was not talking to an English girl."

It was so stupid that she turned and looked at him, smiling faintly. But her answer was quite mild and soft.

"Do not deprive me of compliments because I am a mere American," she said. "I am very fond of them, and respond at once."

"You are very daring," he said, looking straight into her eyes--"deliciously so. American women always are, I think."

"The young devil," he was saying internally. "The beautiful young devil! She throws one off the track."

He found himself more and more attracted and exasperated as they made their rounds. It was his sense of being attracted which was the cause of his exasperation. A girl who could stir one like this would be a dangerous enemy. Even as a friend she would not be safe, because one faced the absurd peril of losing one's head a little and forgetting the precautions one should never lose sight of where a woman was concerned--the precautions which provided for one's holding a good taut rein in one's own hands.

They went from gardens to greenhouses, from greenhouses to stables, and he was on the watch for the moment when she would reveal some little feminine pose or vanity, but, this morning, at least, she laid none bare. She did not strike him as a being of angelic perfections, but she was very modern and not likely to show easily any openings in her armour.

"Of course, I continue to be amazed," he commented, "though one ought not to be amazed at anything which evolves from your extraordinary country. In spite of your impersonal air, I shall persist in regarding you as my benefactor. But, to be frank, I always told Rosalie that if she would write to your father he would certainly put things in order."

"She did write once, you will remember," answered Betty.

"Did she?" with courteous vagueness. "Really, I am afraid I did not hear of it. My poor wife has her own little ideas about the disposal of her income."

And Betty knew that she was expected to believe that Rosy had hoarded the money sent to restore the place, and from sheer weak miserliness had allowed her son's heritage to fall to ruin. And but for Rosy's sake, she might have stopped upon the path and, looking at him squarely, have said, "You are lying to me. And I know the truth."

He continued to converse amiably.

"Of course, it is you one must thank, not only for rousing in the poor girl some interest in her personal appearance, but also some interest in her neighbours. Some women, after they marry and pass girlhood, seem to release their hold on all desire to attract or retain friends. For years Rosalie has given herself up to a chronic semi-invalidism. When the mistress of a house is always depressed and languid and does not return visits, neighbours become discouraged and drop off, as it were."

If his wife had told stories to gain her sympathy his companion would be sure to lose her temper and show her hand. If he could make her openly lose her temper, he would have made an advance.

"One can quite understand that," she said. "It is a great happiness to me to see Rosy gaining ground every day. She has taken me out with her a good many times, and people are beginning to realise that she likes to see them at Stornham."

"You are very delightful," he said, "with your 'She has taken me out.' When I glanced at the magnificent array of cards on the salver in the hall, I realised a number of things, and quite vulgarly lost my breath. The Dunholms have been very amiable in recalling our existence. But charming Americans--of your order--arouse amiable emotions."

"I am very amiable myself," said Betty.

It was he who flushed now. He was losing patience at feeling himself held with such lightness at arm's length, and at being, in spite of himself, somehow compelled to continue to assume a jocular courtesy.

"No, you are not," he answered.

"Not?" repeated Betty, with an incredulous lifting of her brows.

"You are charming and clever, but I rather suspect you of being a vixen. At all events you are a spirited young woman and quick-witted enough to understand the attraction you must have for the sordid herd."

And then he became aware--if not of an opening in her armour--at least of a joint in it. For he saw, near her ear, a deepening warmth. That was it. She was quick-witted, and she hid somewhere a hot pride.

"I confess, however," he proceeded cheerfully, "that notwithstanding my own experience of the habits of the sordid herd, I saw one card I was surprised to find, though really"--shrugging his shoulders--"I ought to have been less surprised to find it than to find any other. But it was bold. I suppose the fellow is desperate."

"You are speaking of----?" suggested Betty.

"Of Mount Dunstan. Hang it all, it WAS bold!" As if in half-amused disgust.

As she had walked through the garden paths, Betty had at intervals bent and gathered a flower, until she held in one hand a loose, fair sheaf. At this moment she stooped to break off a spire of pale blue campanula. And she was--as with a shock--struck with a consciousness that she bent because she must--because to do so was a refuge--a concealment of something she must hide. It had come upon her without a second's warning. Sir Nigel was right. She was a vixen--a virago. She was in such a rage that her heart sprang up and down and her cheek and eyes were on fire. Her long-trained control of herself was gone. And her shock was a lightning-swift awakening to the fact that she felt all this--she must hide her face--because it was this one man--just this one and no other--who was being dragged into this thing with insult.

It was an awakening, and she broke off, rather slowly, one--two--three--even four campanula stems before she stood upright again.

As for Nigel Anstruthers--he went on talking in his low-pitched, disgusted voice.

"Surely he might count himself out of the running. There will be a good deal of running, my dear Betty. You fair Americans have learned that by this time. But that a man who has not even a decent name to offer--who is blackballed by his county--should coolly present himself as a pretendant is an insolence he should be kicked for."

Betty arranged her campanulas carefully. There was no exterior reason why she should draw sword in Lord Mount Dunstan's defence. He had certainly not seemed to expect anything intimately interested from her. His manner she had generally felt to be rather restrained. But one could, in a measure, express one's self.

"Whatsoever the 'running,'" she remarked, "no pretendant has complimented me by presenting himself, so far--and Lord Mount Dunstan is physically an unusually strong man."

"You mean it would be difficult to kick him? Is this partisanship? I hope not. Am I to understand," he added with deliberation, "that Rosalie has received him here?"

"Yes."

"And that you have received him, also--as you have received Lord Westholt?"

"Quite."

"Then I must discuss the matter with Rosalie. It is not to be discussed with you."

"You mean that you will exercise your authority in the matter?"

"In England, my dear girl, the master of a house is still sometimes guilty of exercising authority in matters which concern the reputation of his female relatives. In the absence of your father, I shall not allow you, while you are under my roof, to endanger your name in any degree. I am, at least, your brother by marriage. I intend to protect you."

"Thank you," said Betty.

"You are young and extremely handsome, you will have an enormous fortune, and you have evidently had your own way all your life. A girl, such as you are, may either make a magnificent marriage or a ridiculous and humiliating one. Neither American young women, nor English young men, are as disinterested as they were some years ago. Each has begun to learn what the other has to give."

"I think that is true," commented Betty.

"In some cases there is a good deal to be exchanged on both sides. You have a great deal to give, and should get exchange worth accepting. A beggared estate and a tainted title are not good enough."

"That is businesslike," Betty made comment again.

Sir Nigel laughed quietly.

"The fact is--I hope you won't misunderstand my saying it--you do not strike me as being UN-businesslike, yourself."

"I am not," answered Betty.

"I thought not," rather narrowing his eyes as he watched her, because he believed that she must involuntarily show her hand if he irritated her sufficiently. "You do not impress me as being one of the girls who make unsuccessful marriages. You are a modern New York beauty--not an early Victorian sentimentalist." He did not despair of results from his process of irritation. To gently but steadily convey to a beautiful and spirited young creature that no man could approach her without ulterior motive was rather a good idea. If one could make it clear--with a casual air of sensibly taking it for granted--that the natural power of youth, wit, and beauty were rendered impotent by a greatness of fortune whose proportions obliterated all else; if one simply argued from the premise that young love was no affair of hers, since she must always be regarded as a gilded chattel, whose cost was writ large in plain figures, what girl, with blood in her veins, could endure it long without wincing? This girl had undue, and, as he regarded such matters, unseemly control over her temper and her nerves, but she had blood enough in her veins, and presently she would say or do something which would give him a lead.

"When you marry----" he began.

She lifted her head delicately, but ended the sentence for him with eyes which were actually not unsmiling.

"When I marry, I shall ask something in exchange for what I have to give."

"If the exchange is to be equal, you must ask a great deal," he answered. "That is why you must be protected from such fellows as Mount Dunstan."

"If it becomes necessary, perhaps I shall be able to protect myself," she said.

"Ah!" regretfully, "I am afraid I have annoyed you--and that you need protection more than you suspect." If she were flesh and blood, she could scarcely resist resenting the implication contained in this. But resist it she did, and with a cool little smile which stirred him to sudden, if irritated, admiration.

She paused a second, and used the touch of gentle regret herself.

"You have wounded my vanity by intimating that my admirers do not love me for myself alone."

He paused, also, and, narrowing his eyes again, looked straight between her lashes.

"They ought to love you for yourself alone," he said, in a low voice. "You are a deucedly attractive girl."

"Oh, Betty," Rosy had pleaded, "don't make him angry--don't make him angry."

So Betty lifted her shoulders slightly without comment.

"Shall we go back to the house now?" she said. "Rosalie will naturally be anxious to hear that what has been done in your absence has met with your approval."

In what manner his approval was expressed to Rosalie, Betty did not hear this morning, at least. Externally cool though she had appeared, the process had not been without its results, and she felt that she would prefer to be alone.

"I must write some letters to catch the next steamer," she said, as she went upstairs.

When she entered her room, she went to her writing table and sat down, with pen and paper before her. She drew the paper towards her and took up the pen, but the next moment she laid it down and gave a slight push to the paper. As she did so she realised that her hand trembled.

"I must not let myself form the habit of falling into rages--or I shall not be able to keep still some day, when I ought to do it," she whispered. "I am in a fury--a fury." And for a moment she covered her face.

She was a strong girl, but a girl, notwithstanding her powers. What she suddenly saw was that, as if by one movement of some powerful unseen hand, Rosy, who had been the centre of all things, had been swept out of her thought. Her anger at the injustice done to Rosy had been as nothing before the fire which had flamed in her at the insult flung at the other. And all that was undue and unbalanced. One might as well look the thing straightly in the face. Her old child hatred of Nigel Anstruthers had sprung up again in ten-fold strength. There was, it was true, something abominable about him, something which made his words more abominable than they would have been if another man had uttered them--but, though it was inevitable that his method should rouse one, where those of one's own blood were concerned, it was not enough to fill one with raging flame when his malignity was dealing with those who were almost strangers. Mount Dunstan was almost a stranger--she had met Lord Westholt oftener. Would she have felt the same hot beat of the blood, if Lord Westholt had been concerned? No, she answered herself frankly, she would not.