CHAPTER XXXV

THE TIDAL WAVE

There was only one man to speak to, and it being the nature of the beast--so he harshly put it to himself--to be absolutely impelled to speech at such times, Mount Dunstan laid bare his breast to him, tearing aside all the coverings pride would have folded about him. The man was, of course, Penzance, and the laying bare was done the evening after the story of Red Godwyn had been told in the laurel walk.

They had driven home together in a profound silence, the elder man as deep in thought as the younger one. Penzance was thinking that there was a calmness in having reached sixty and in knowing that the pain and hunger of earlier years would not tear one again. And yet, he himself was not untorn by that which shook the man for whom his affection had grown year by year. It was evidently very bad--very bad, indeed. He wondered if he would speak of it, and wished he would, not because he himself had much to say in answer, but because he knew that speech would be better than hard silence.

"Stay with me to-night," Mount Dunstan said, as they drove through the avenue to the house. "I want you to dine with me and sit and talk late. I am not sleeping well."

They often dined together, and the vicar not infrequently slept at the

Mount for mere companionship's sake. Sometimes they read, sometimes went

over accounts, planned economies, and balanced expenditures. A chamber still called the Chaplain's room was always kept in readiness. It had been used in long past days, when a household chaplain had sat below the salt and left his patron's table before the sweets were served. They dined together this night almost as silently as they had driven homeward, and after the meal they went and sat alone in the library.

The huge room was never more than dimly lighted, and the far-off corners seemed more darkling than usual in the insufficient illumination of the far from brilliant lamps. Mount Dunstan, after standing upon the hearth for a few minutes smoking a pipe, which would have compared ill with old Doby's Sunday splendour, left his coffee cup upon the mantel and began to tramp up and down--out of the dim light into the shadows, back out of the shadows into the poor light.

"You know," he said, "what I think about most things--you know what I feel."

"I think I do."

"You know what I feel about Englishmen who brand themselves as half men and marked merchandise by selling themselves and their houses and their blood to foreign women who can buy them. You know how savage I have been

at the mere thought of it. And how I have sworn----"

"Yes, I know what you have sworn," said Mr. Penzance.

It struck him that Mount Dunstan shook and tossed his head rather like a bull about to charge an enemy.

"You know how I have felt myself perfectly within my rights when I blackguarded such men and sneered at such women--taking it for granted that each was merchandise of his or her kind and beneath contempt. I am not a foul-mouthed man, but I have used gross words and rough ones to describe them."

"I have heard you."

Mount Dunstan threw back his head with a big, harsh laugh. He came out of the shadow and stood still.

"Well," he said, "I am in love--as much in love as any lunatic ever was--with the daughter of Reuben S. Vanderpoel. There you are--and there I am!"

"It has seemed to me," Penzance answered, "that it was almost inevitable."

"My condition is such that it seems to ME that it would be inevitable in the case of any man. When I see another man look at her my blood races

through my veins with an awful fear and a wicked heat. That will show you the point I have reached." He walked over to the mantelpiece and laid his pipe down with a hand Penzance saw was unsteady. "In turning over the pages of the volume of Life," he said, "I have come upon the Book of Revelations."

"That is true," Penzance said.

"Until one has come upon it one is an inchoate fool," Mount Dunstan went on. "And afterwards one is--for a time at least--a sort of madman raving to one's self, either in or out of a straitjacket--as the case may be. I am wearing the jacket--worse luck! Do you know anything of the state of a man who cannot utter the most ordinary words to a woman without being conscious that he is making mad love to her? This afternoon I found myself telling Miss Vanderpoel the story of Red Godwyn and Alys of the Sea-Blue Eyes. I did not make a single statement having any connection with myself, but throughout I was calling on her to think of herself and of me as of those two. I saw her in my own arms, with the tears of Alys on her lashes. I was making mad love, though she was unconscious of my doing it."

"How do you know she was unconscious?" remarked Mr. Penzance. "You are a
very strong man."

Mount Dunstan's short laugh was even a little awful, because it meant so

much. He let his forehead drop a moment on to his arms as they rested on the mantelpiece.

"Oh, my God!" he said. But the next instant his head lifted itself. "It is the mystery of the world--this thing. A tidal wave gathering itself mountain high and crashing down upon one's helplessness might be as easily defied. It is supposed to disperse, I believe. That has been said so often that there must be truth in it. In twenty or thirty or forty years one is told one will have got over it. But one must live through the years--one must LIVE through them--and the chief feature of one's madness is that one is convinced that they will last forever."

"Go on," said Mr. Penzance, because he had paused and stood biting his lip. "Say all that you feel inclined to say. It is the best thing you can do. I have never gone through this myself, but I have seen and known the amazingness of it for many years. I have seen it come and go."

"Can you imagine," Mount Dunstan said, "that the most damnable thought of all--when a man is passing through it--is the possibility of its GOING? Anything else rather than the knowledge that years could change or death could end it! Eternity seems only to offer space for it. One knows--but one does not believe. It does something to one's brain."

"No scientist, howsoever profound, has ever discovered what," the vicar mused aloud.

"The Book of Revelations has shown to me how--how MAGNIFICENT life might

be!" Mount Dunstan clenched and unclenched his hands, his eyes flashing. "Magnificent--that is the word. To go to her on equal ground to take her hands and speak one's passion as one would--as her eyes answered. Oh, one would know! To bring her home to this place--having made it as it once was--to live with her here--to be WITH her as the sun rose and set and the seasons changed--with the joy of life filling each of them. SHE is the joy of Life--the very heart of it. You see where I am--you see!"

"Yes," Penzance answered. He saw, and bowed his head, and Mount Dunstan

knew he wished him to continue.

"Sometimes--of late--it has been too much for me and I have given free rein to my fancy--knowing that there could never be more than fancy. I was doing it this afternoon as I watched her move about among the people. And Mary Lithcom began to talk about her." He smiled a grim smile. "Perhaps it was an intervention of the gods to drag me down from my impious heights. She was quite unconscious that she was driving home facts like nails--the facts that every man who wanted money wanted Reuben S. Vanderpoel's daughter--and that the young lady, not being dull, was not unaware of the obvious truth! And that men with prizes to offer were ready to offer them in a proper manner. Also that she was only a brilliant bird of passage, who, in a few months, would be caught in the dazzling net of the great world. And that even Lord Westholt and Dunholm Castle were not quite what she might expect. Lady Mary was

sincerely interested. She drove it home in her ardour. She told me to LOOK at her--to LOOK at her mouth and chin and eyelashes--and to make note of what she stood for in a crowd of ordinary people. I could have laughed aloud with rage and self-mockery."

Mr. Penzance was resting his forehead on his hand, his elbow on his chair's arm.

"This is profound unhappiness," he said. "It is profound unhappiness."

Mount Dunstan answered by a brusque gesture.

"But it will pass away," went on Penzance, "and not as you fear it must," in answer to another gesture, fiercely impatient. "Not that way. Some day--or night--you will stand here together, and you will tell her all you have told me. I KNOW it will be so."

"What!" Mount Dunstan cried out. But the words had been spoken with such absolute conviction that he felt himself become pale.

It was with the same conviction that Penzance went on.

"I have spent my quiet life in thinking of the forces for which we find no explanation--of the causes of which we only see the effects. Long ago in looking at you in one of my pondering moments I said to myself that

YOU were of the Primeval Force which cannot lose its way--which sweeps a clear pathway for itself as it moves--and which cannot be held back. I said to you just now that because you are a strong man you cannot be sure that a woman you are--even in spite of yourself--making mad love to, is unconscious that you are doing it. You do not know what your strength lies in. I do not, the woman does not, but we must all feel it, whether we comprehend it or no. You said of this fine creature, some time since, that she was Life, and you have just said again something of the same kind. It is quite true. She is Life, and the joy of it. You are two strong forces, and you are drawing together."

He rose from his chair, and going to Mount Dunstan put his hand on his shoulder, his fine old face singularly rapt and glowing.

"She is drawing you and you are drawing her, and each is too strong to release the other. I believe that to be true. Both bodies and souls do it. They are not separate things. They move on their way as the stars do--they move on their way."

As he spoke, Mount Dunstan's eyes looked into his fixedly. Then they turned aside and looked down upon the mantel against which he was leaning. He aimlessly picked up his pipe and laid it down again. He was paler than before, but he said no single word.

"You think your reasons for holding aloof from her are the reasons of a man." Mr. Penzance's voice sounded to him remote. "They are the reasons

of a man's pride--but that is not the strongest thing in the world. It only imagines it is. You think that you cannot go to her as a luckier man could. You think nothing shall force you to speak. Ask yourself why. It is because you believe that to show your heart would be to place yourself in the humiliating position of a man who might seem to her and to the world to be a base fellow."

"An impudent, pushing, base fellow," thrust in Mount Dunstan fiercely. "One of a vulgar lot. A thing fancying even its beggary worth buying. What has a man--whose very name is hung with tattered ugliness--to offer?"

Penzance's hand was still on his shoulder and his look at him was long.

"His very pride," he said at last, "his very obstinacy and haughty, stubborn determination. Those broken because the other feeling is the stronger and overcomes him utterly."

A flush leaped to Mount Dunstan's forehead. He set both elbows on the mantel and let his forehead fall on his clenched fists. And the savage Briton rose in him.

"No!" he said passionately. "By God, no!"

"You say that," said the older man, "because you have not yet reached the end of your tether. Unhappy as you are, you are not unhappy

enough. Of the two, you love yourself the more--your pride and your stubbornness."

"Yes," between his teeth. "I suppose I retain yet a sort of respect--and affection--for my pride. May God leave it to me!"

Penzance felt himself curiously exalted; he knew himself unreasoningly passing through an oddly unpractical, uplifted moment, in whose impelling he singularly believed.

"You are drawing her and she is drawing you," he said. "Perhaps you drew each other across seas. You will stand here together and you will tell her of this--on this very spot."

Mount Dunstan changed his position and laughed roughly, as if to rouse himself. He threw out his arm in a big, uneasy gesture, taking in the room.

"Oh, come," he said. "You talk like a seer. Look about you. Look! I am to bring her here!"

"If it is the primeval thing she will not care. Why should she?"

"She! Bring a life like hers to this! Or perhaps you mean that her own wealth might make her surroundings becoming--that a man would endure that?"

"If it is the primeval thing, YOU would not care. You would have forgotten that you two had ever lived an hour apart."

He spoke with a deep, moved gravity--almost as if he were speaking of the first Titan building of the earth. Mount Dunstan staring at his delicate, insistent, elderly face, tried to laugh again--and failed because the effort seemed actually irreverent. It was a singular hypnotic moment, indeed. He himself was hypnotised. A flashlight of new vision blazed before him and left him dumb. He took up his pipe hurriedly, and with still unsteady fingers began to refill it. When it was filled he lighted it, and then without a word of answer left the hearth and began to tramp up and down the room again--out of the dim light into the shadows, back out of the shadows and into the dim light again, his brow working and his teeth holding hard his amber mouthpiece.

The morning awakening of a normal healthy human creature should be a joyous thing. After the soul's long hours of release from the burden of the body, its long hours spent--one can only say in awe at the mystery of it, "away, away"--in flight, perhaps, on broad, tireless wings, beating softly in fair, far skies, breathing pure life, to be brought back to renew the strength of each dawning day; after these hours of quiescence of limb and nerve and brain, the morning life returning should unseal for the body clear eyes of peace at least. In time to come this will be so, when the soul's wings are stronger, the body more attuned to infinite law and the race a greater power--but as yet it

often seems as though the winged thing came back a lagging and reluctant rebel against its fate and the chain which draws it back a prisoner to its toil.

It had seemed so often to Mount Dunstan--oftener than not. Youth should not know such awakening, he was well aware; but he had known it sometimes even when he had been a child, and since his return from his ill-starred struggle in America, the dull and reluctant facing of the day had become a habit. Yet on the morning after his talk with his friend--the curious, uplifted, unpractical talk which had seemed to hypnotise him--he knew when he opened his eyes to the light that he had awakened as a man should awake--with an unreasoning sense of pleasure in the life and health of his own body, as he stretched mighty limbs, strong after the night's rest, and feeling that there was work to be done. It was all unreasoning--there was no more to be done than on those other days which he had wakened to with bitterness, because they seemed useless and empty of any worth--but this morning the mere light of the sun was of use, the rustle of the small breeze in the leaves, the soft floating past of the white clouds, the mere fact that the great blind-faced, stately house was his own, that he could tramp far over lands which were his heritage, unfed though they might be, and that the very rustics who would pass him in the lanes were, so to speak, his own people: that he had name, life, even the common thing of hunger for his morning food--it was all of use.

An alluring picture--of a certain deep, clear bathing pool in the park

rose before him. It had not called to him for many a day, and now he saw its dark blueness gleam between flags and green rushes in its encircling thickness of shrubs and trees.

He sprang from his bed, and in a few minutes was striding across the grass of the park, his towels over his arm, his head thrown back as he drank in the freshness of the morning-scented air. It was scented with dew and grass and the breath of waking trees and growing things; early twitters and thrills were to be heard here and there, insisting on morning joyfulness; rabbits frisked about among the fine-grassed hummocks of their warren and, as he passed, scuttled back into their holes, with a whisking of short white tails, at which he laughed with friendly amusement. Cropping stags lifted their antlered heads, and fawns with dappled sides and immense lustrous eyes gazed at him without actual fear, even while they sidled closer to their mothers. A skylark springing suddenly from the grass a few yards from his feet made him stop short once and stand looking upward and listening. Who could pass by a skylark at five o'clock on a summer's morning--the little, heavenly light-heart circling and wheeling, showering down diamonds, showering down pearls, from its tiny pulsating, trilling throat?

"Do you know why they sing like that? It is because all but the joy of things has been kept hidden from them. They knew nothing but life and flight and mating, and the gold of the sun. So they sing." That she had once said.

He listened until the jewelled rain seemed to have fallen into his soul. Then he went on his way smiling as he knew he had never smiled in his life before. He knew it because he realised that he had never before felt the same vigorous, light normality of spirit, the same sense of being as other men. It was as though something had swept a great clear space about him, and having room for air he breathed deep and was glad of the commonest gifts of being.

The bathing pool had been the greatest pleasure of his uncared-for boyhood. No one knew which long passed away Mount Dunstan had made it.

The oldest villager had told him that it had "allus ben there," even in his father's time. Since he himself had known it he had seen that it was kept at its best.

Its dark blue depths reflected in their pellucid clearness the water plants growing at its edge and the enclosing shrubs and trees. The turf bordering it was velvet-thick and green, and a few flag-steps led down to the water. Birds came there to drink and bathe and preen and dress their feathers. He knew there were often nests in the bushes--sometimes the nests of nightingales who filled the soft darkness or moonlight of early June with the wonderfulness of nesting song. Sometimes a straying fawn poked in a tender nose, and after drinking delicately stole away, as if it knew itself a trespasser.

To undress and plunge headlong into the dark sapphire water was a

rapturous thing. He swam swiftly and slowly by turns, he floated, looking upward at heaven's blue, listening to birds' song and inhaling all the fragrance of the early day. Strength grew in him and life pulsed as the water lapped his limbs. He found himself thinking with pleasure of a long walk he intended to take to see a farmer he must talk to about his hop gardens; he found himself thinking with pleasure of other things as simple and common to everyday life--such things as he ordinarily faced merely because he must, since he could not afford an experienced bailiff. He was his own bailiff, his own steward, merely, he had often thought, an unsuccessful farmer of half-starved lands. But this morning neither he nor they seemed so starved, and--for no reason--there was a future of some sort.

He emerged from his pool glowing, the turf feeling like velvet beneath his feet, a fine light in his eyes.

"Yes," he said, throwing out his arms in a lordly stretch of physical well-being, "it might be a magnificent thing--mere strong living. THIS is magnificent."