

CHAPTER XXXVI

BY THE ROADSIDE EVERYWHERE

His breakfast and the talk over it with Penzance seemed good things. It suddenly had become worth while to discuss the approaching hop harvest and the yearly influx of the hop pickers from London. Yesterday the subject had appeared discouraging enough. The great hop gardens of the estate had been in times past its most prolific source of agricultural revenue and the boast and wonder of the hop-growing county. The neglect and scant food of the lean years had cost them their reputation. Each season they had needed smaller bands of "hoppers," and their standard had been lowered. It had been his habit to think of them gloomily, as of hopeless and irretrievable loss. Because this morning, for a remote reason, the pulse of life beat strong in him he was taking a new view. Might not study of the subject, constant attention and the application of all available resource to one end produce appreciable results? The idea presented itself in the form of a thing worth thinking of.

"It would provide an outlook and give one work to do," he put it to his companion. "To have a roof over one's head, a sound body, and work to do, is not so bad. Such things form the whole of G. Selden's cheerful aim. His spirit is alight within me. I will walk over and talk to Bolter."

Bolter was a farmer whose struggle to make ends meet was almost too much

for him. Holdings whose owners, either through neglect or lack of money, have failed to do their duty as landlords in the matter of repairs of farmhouses, outbuildings, fences, and other things, gradually fall into poor hands. Resourceful and prosperous farmers do not care to hold lands under unprosperous landlords. There were farms lying vacant on the Mount Dunstan estate, there were others whose tenants were uncertain rent payers or slipshod workers or dishonest in small ways. Waste or sale of the fertiliser which should have been given to the soil as its due, neglect in the case of things whose decay meant depreciation of property and expense to the landlord, were dishonesties. But Mount Dunstan knew that if he turned out Thorn and Fittle, whom no watching could wholly frustrate in their tricks, Under Mount Farm and Oakfield Rise would stand empty for many a year. But for his poverty Bolter would have been a good tenant enough. He was in trouble now because, though his hops promised well, he faced difficulties in the matter of "pickers." Last year he had not been able to pay satisfactory prices in return for labour, and as a result the prospect of securing good workers was an unpromising one.

The hordes of men, women, and children who flock year after year to the hop-growing districts know each other. They learn also which may be called the good neighbourhoods and which the bad; the gardens whose holders are considered satisfactory as masters, and those who are undesirable. They know by experience or report where the best "huts" are provided, where tents are supplied, and where one must get along as one can.

Generally the regular flocks are under a "captain," who gathers his followers each season, manages them and looks after their interests and their employers'. In some cases the same captain brings his regiment to the same gardens year after year, and ends by counting himself as of the soil and almost of the family of his employer. Each hard, thick-fogged winter they fight through in their East End courts and streets, they look forward to the open-air weeks spent between long, narrow green groves of tall garlanded poles, whose wreathings hang thick with fresh and pungent-scented hop clusters. Children play "oppin" in dingy rooms and alleys, and talk to each other of days when the sun shone hot and birds were singing and flowers smelling sweet in the hedgerows; of others when the rain streamed down and made mud of the soft earth, and yet there was pleasure in the gipsying life, and high cheer in the fire of sticks built in the field by some bold spirit, who hung over it a tin kettle to boil for tea. They never forgot the gentry they had caught sight of riding or driving by on the road, the parson who came to talk, and the occasional groups of ladies from the "great house" who came into the gardens to walk about and look at the bins and ask queer questions in their gentry-sounding voices. They never knew anything, and they always seemed to be entertained. Sometimes there were enterprising, laughing ones, who asked to be shown how to strip the hops into the bins, and after being shown played at the work for a little while, taking off their gloves and showing white fingers with rings on. They always looked as if they had just been washed, and as if all of their clothes were fresh from the tub, and when anyone stood near them it

was observable that they smelt nice. Generally they gave pennies to the children before they left the garden, and sometimes shillings to the women. The hop picking was, in fact, a wonderful blend of work and holiday combined.

Mount Dunstan had liked the "hopping" from his first memories of it. He could recall his sensations of welcoming a renewal of interesting things when, season after season, he had begun to mark the early stragglers on the road. The stragglers were not of the class gathered under captains. They were derelicts--tramps who spent their summers on the highways and their winters in such workhouses as would take them in; tinkers, who differ from the tramps only because sometimes they owned a rickety cart full of strange household goods and drunken tenth-hand perambulators piled with dirty bundles and babies, these last propelled by robust or worn-out, slatternly women, who sat by the small roadside fire stirring the battered pot or tending the battered kettle, when resting time had come and food must be cooked. Gipsies there were who had cooking fires also, and hobbled horses cropping the grass. Now and then appeared a grand one, who was rumoured to be a Lee and therefore royal, and who came and lived regally in a gaily painted caravan. During the late summer weeks one began to see slouching figures tramping along the high road at intervals. These were men who were old, men who were middle-aged and some who were young, all of them more or less dust-grimed, weather-beaten, or ragged. Occasionally one was to be seen in heavy beery slumber under the hedgerow, or lying on the grass smoking lazily, or with painful thrift cobbling up a hole in a garment. Such as these

were drifting in early that they might be on the ground when pickers were wanted. They were the forerunners of the regular army.

On his walk to West Ways, the farm Bolter lived on, Mount Dunstan passed two or three of these strays. They were the usual flotsam and jetsam, but on the roadside near a hop garden he came upon a group of an aspect so unusual that it attracted his attention. Its unusualness consisted in its air of exceeding bustling cheerfulness. It was a domestic group of the most luckless type, and ragged, dirty, and worn by an evidently long tramp, might well have been expected to look forlorn, discouraged, and out of spirits. A slouching father of five children, one plainly but a few weeks old, and slung in a dirty shawl at its mother's breast, an unhealthy looking slattern mother, two ancient perambulators, one piled with dingy bundles and cooking utensils, the seven-year-old eldest girl unpacking things and keeping an eye at the same time on the two youngest, who were neither of them old enough to be steady on their feet, the six-year-old gleefully aiding the slouching father to build the wayside fire. The mother sat upon the grass nursing her baby and staring about her with an expression at once stupefied and illuminated by some temporary bliss. Even the slouching father was grinning, as if good luck had befallen him, and the two youngest were tumbling about with squeals of good cheer. This was not the humour in which such a group usually dropped wearily on the grass at the wayside to eat its meagre and uninviting meal and rest its dragging limbs. As he drew near, Mount Dunstan saw that at the woman's side there stood a basket full of food and a can full of milk.

Ordinarily he would have passed on, but, perhaps because of the human glow the morning had brought him, he stopped and spoke.

"Have you come for the hopping?" he asked.

The man touched his forehead, apparently not conscious that the grin was yet on his face.

"Yes, sir," he answered.

"How far have you walked?"

"A good fifty miles since we started, sir. It took us a good bit. We was pretty done up when we stopped here. But we've 'ad a wonderful piece of good luck." And his grin broadened immensely.

"I am glad to hear that," said Mount Dunstan. The good luck was plainly of a nature to have excited them greatly. Chance good luck did not happen to people like themselves. They were in the state of mind which in their class can only be relieved by talk. The woman broke in, her weak mouth and chin quite unsteady.

"Seems like it can't be true, sir," she said. "I'd only just come out of the Union--after this one," signifying the new baby at her breast. "I wasn't fit to drag along day after day. We 'ad to stop 'ere 'cos I was

near fainting away."

"She looked fair white when she sat down," put in the man. "Like she was goin' off."

"And that very minute," said the woman, "a young lady came by on 'orseback, an' the minute she sees me she stops her 'orse an' gets down."

"I never seen nothing like the quick way she done it," said the husband. "Sharp, like she was a soldier under order. Down an' give the bridle to the groom an' comes over."

"And kneels down," the woman took him up, "right by me an' says, 'What's the matter? What can I do?' an' finds out in two minutes an' sends to the farm for some brandy an' all this basketful of stuff," jerking her head towards the treasure at her side. "An' gives 'IM," with another jerk towards her mate, "money enough to 'elp us along till I'm fair on my feet. That quick it was--that quick," passing her hand over her forehead, "as if it wasn't for the basket," with a nervous, half-hysteric giggle, "I wouldn't believe but what it was a dream--I wouldn't."

"She was a very kind young lady," said Mount Dunstan, "and you were in luck."

He gave a few coppers to the children and strode on his way. The glow was hot in his heart, and he held his head high.

"She has gone by," he said. "She has gone by."

He knew he should find her at West Ways Farm, and he did so. Slim and straight as a young birch tree, and elate with her ride in the morning air, she stood silhouetted in her black habit against the ancient whitewashed brick porch as she talked to Bolter.

"I have been drinking a glass of milk and asking questions about hops," she said, giving him her hand bare of glove. "Until this year I have never seen a hop garden or a hop picker."

After the exchange of a few words Bolter respectfully melted away and left them together.

"It was such a wonderful day that I wanted to be out under the sky for a long time--to ride a long way," she explained. "I have been looking at hop gardens as I rode. I have watched them all the summer--from the time when there was only a little thing with two or three pale green leaves looking imploringly all the way up to the top of each immensely tall hop pole, from its place in the earth at the bottom of it--as if it was saying over and over again, under its breath, 'Can I get up there? Can I get up? Can I do it in time? Can I do it in time?' Yes, that was what they were saying, the little bold things. I have watched them ever

since, putting out tendrils and taking hold of the poles and pulling and climbing like little acrobats. And curling round and unfolding leaves and more leaves, until at last they threw them out as if they were beginning to boast that they could climb up into the blue of the sky if the summer were long enough. And now, look at them!" her hand waved towards the great gardens. "Forests of them, cool green pathways and avenues with leaf canopies over them."

"You have seen it all," he said. "You do see things, don't you? A few hundred yards down the road I passed something you had seen. I knew it was you who had seen it, though the poor wretches had not heard your name."

She hesitated a moment, then stooped down and took up in her hand a bit of pebbled earth from the pathway. There was storm in the blue of her eyes as she held it out for him to look at as it lay on the bare rose-flesh of her palm.

"See," she said, "see, it is like that--what we give. It is like that." And she tossed the earth away.

"It does not seem like that to those others."

"No, thank God, it does not. But to one's self it is the mere luxury of self-indulgence, and the realisation of it sometimes tempts one to be even a trifle morbid. Don't you see," a sudden thrill in her voice

startled him, "they are on the roadside everywhere all over the world."

"Yes. All over the world."

"Once when I was a child of ten I read a magazine article about the suffering millions and the monstrosly rich, who were obviously to blame for every starved sob and cry. It almost drove me out of my childish senses. I went to my father and threw myself into his arms in a violent fit of crying. I clung to him and sobbed out, 'Let us give it all away; let us give it all away and be like other people!'"

"What did he say?"

"He said we could never be quite like other people. We had a certain load to carry along the highway. It was the thing the whole world wanted and which we ourselves wanted as much as the rest, and we could not sanely throw it away. It was my first lesson in political economy and I abhorred it. I was a passionate child and beat furiously against the stone walls enclosing present suffering. It was horrible to know that they could not be torn down. I cried out, 'When I see anyone who is miserable by the roadside I shall stop and give him everything he wants--everything!' I was ten years old, and thought it could be done."

"But you stop by the roadside even now."

"Yes. That one can do."

"You are two strong creatures and you draw each other," Penzance had said. "Perhaps you drew each other across seas. Who knows?"

Coming to West Ways on a chance errand he had, as it were, found her awaiting him on the threshold. On her part she had certainly not anticipated seeing him there, but--when one rides far afield in the sun there are roads towards which one turns as if answering a summoning call, and as her horse had obeyed a certain touch of the rein at a certain point her cheek had felt momentarily hot.

Until later, when the "picking" had fairly begun, the kilns would not be at work; but there was some interest even now in going over the ground for the first time.

"I have never been inside an oast house," she said; "Bolter is going to show me his, and explain technicalities."

"May I come with you?" he asked.

There was a change in him. Something had lighted in his eyes since the day before, when he had told her his story of Red Godwyn. She wondered what it was. They went together over the place, escorted by Bolter. They looked into the great circular ovens, on whose floors the hops would be laid for drying, they mounted ladder-like steps to the upper room where, when dried, the same hops would lie in soft, light piles, until pushed

with wooden shovels into the long "pokes" to be pressed and packed into a solid marketable mass. Bolter was allowed to explain the technicalities, but it was plain that Mount Dunstan was familiar with all of them, and it was he who, with a sentence here and there, gave her the colour of things.

"When it is being done there is nearly always outside a touch of the sharp sweetness of early autumn," he said "The sun slanting through the little window falls on the pale yellow heaps, and there is a pungent scent of hops in the air which is rather intoxicating."

"I am coming later to see the entire process," she answered.

It was a mere matter of seeing common things together and exchanging common speech concerning them, but each was so strongly conscious of the other that no sentence could seem wholly impersonal. There are times when the whole world is personal to a mood whose intensity seems a reason for all things. Words are of small moment when the mere sound of a voice makes an unreasonable joy.

"There was that touch of sharp autumn sweetness in the air yesterday morning," she said. "And the chaplets of briony berries that look as if they had been thrown over the hedges are beginning to change to scarlet here and there. The wild rose-haws are reddening, and so are the clusters of berries on the thorn trees and bushes."

"There are millions of them," Mount Dunstan said, "and in a few weeks' time they will look like bunches of crimson coral. When the sun shines on them they will be wonderful to see."

What was there in such speeches as these to draw any two nearer and nearer to each other as they walked side by side--to fill the morning air with an intensity of life, to seem to cause the world to drop away and become as nothing? As they had been isolated during their waltz in the crowded ballroom at Dunholm Castle, so they were isolated now. When they stood in the narrow green groves of the hop garden, talking simply of the placing of the bins and the stripping and measuring of the vines, there might have been no human thing within a hundred miles--within a thousand. For the first time his height and strength conveyed to her an impression of physical beauty. His walk and bearing gave her pleasure. When he turned his red-brown eyes upon her suddenly she was conscious that she liked their colour, their shape, the power of the look in them. On his part, he--for the twentieth time--found himself newly moved by the dower nature had bestowed on her. Had the world ever held before a woman creature so much to be longed for?--abnormal wealth, New York and Fifth Avenue notwithstanding, a man could only think of folding arms round her and whispering in her lovely ear--follies, oaths, prayers, gratitude.

And yet as they went about together there was growing in Betty Vanderpoel's mind a certain realisation. It grew in spite of the recognition of the change in him--the new thing lighted in his eyes.

Whatsoever he felt--if he felt anything--he would never allow himself speech. How could he? In his place she could not speak herself. Because he was the strong thing which drew her thoughts, he would not come to any woman only to cast at her feet a burden which, in the nature of things, she must take up. And suddenly she comprehended that the mere obstinate Briton in him--even apart from greater things--had an immense attraction for her. As she liked now the red-brown colour of his eyes and saw beauty in his rugged features, so she liked his British stubbornness and the pride which would not be beaten.

"It is the unconquerable thing, which leads them in their battles and makes them bear any horror rather than give in. They have taken half the world with it; they are like bulldogs and lions," she thought. "And--and I am glorying in it."

"Do you know," said Mount Dunstan, "that sometimes you suddenly fling out the most magnificent flag of colour--as if some splendid flame of thought had sent up a blaze?"

"I hope it is not a habit," she answered. "When one has a splendid flare of thought one should be modest about it."

What was there worth recording in the whole hour they spent together? Outwardly there had only been a chance meeting and a mere passing by. But each left something with the other and each learned something; and the record made was deep.

At last she was on her horse again, on the road outside the white gate.

"This morning has been so much to the good," he said. "I had thought that perhaps we might scarcely meet again this year. I shall become absorbed in hops and you will no doubt go away. You will make visits or go to the Riviera--or to New York for the winter?"

"I do not know yet. But at least I shall stay to watch the thorn trees load themselves with coral." To herself she was saying: "He means to keep away. I shall not see him."

As she rode off Mount Dunstan stood for a few moments, not moving from his place. At a short distance from the farmhouse gate a side lane opened upon the highway, and as she cantered in its direction a horseman turned in from it--a man who was young and well dressed and who sat well a spirited animal. He came out upon the road almost face to face with Miss Vanderpoel, and from where he stood Mount Dunstan could see his delighted smile as he lifted his hat in salute. It was Lord Westholt, and what more natural than that after an exchange of greetings the two should ride together on their way! For nearly three miles their homeward road would be the same.

But in a breath's space Mount Dunstan realised a certain truth--a simple, elemental thing. All the exaltation of the morning swooped and fell as a bird seems to swoop and fall through space. It was all

over and done with, and he understood it. His normal awakening in the morning, the physical and mental elation of the first clear hours, the spring of his foot as he had trod the road, had all had but one meaning. In some occult way the hypnotic talk of the night before had formed itself into a reality, fantastic and unreasoning as it had been. Some insistent inner consciousness had seized upon and believed it in spite of him and had set all his waking being in tune to it. That was the explanation of his undue spirits and hope. If Penzance had spoken a truth he would have had a natural, sane right to feel all this and more. But the truth was that he, in his guise--was one of those who are "on the roadside everywhere--all over the world." Poetically figurative as the thing sounded, it was prosaic fact.

So, still hearing the distant sounds of the hoofs beating in cheerful diminuendo on the roadway, he turned about and went back to talk to Bolter.