CHAPTER XXXVII

CLOSED CORRIDORS

To spend one's days perforce in an enormous house alone is a thing likely to play unholy tricks with a man's mind and lead it to gloomy workings. To know the existence of a hundred or so of closed doors shut on the darkness of unoccupied rooms; to be conscious of flights of unmounted stairs, of stretches of untrodden corridors, of unending walls, from which the pictured eyes of long dead men and women stare, as if seeing things which human eyes behold not--is an eerie and unwholesome thing. Mount Dunstan slept in a large four-post bed in a chamber in which he might have died or been murdered a score of times without being able to communicate with the remote servants' quarters below stairs, where lay the one man and one woman who attended him. When he came late to his room and prepared for sleep by the light of two flickering candles the silence of the dead in tombs was about him; but it was only a more profound and insistent thing than the silence of the day, because it was the silence of the night, which is a presence. He used to tell himself with secret smiles at the fact that at certain times the fantasy was half believable--that there were things which walked about softly at night--things which did not want to be dead. He himself had picked them out from among the pictures in the gallery--pretty, light, petulant women; adventurous-eyed, full-blooded, eager men. His theory was that they hated their stone coffins, and fought their way back through the grey mists to try to talk and make

love and to be seen of warm things which were alive. But it was not to be done, because they had no bodies and no voices, and when they beat upon closed doors they would not open. Still they came back--came back. And sometimes there was a rustle and a sweep through the air in a passage, or a creak, or a sense of waiting which was almost a sound.

"Perhaps some of them have gone when they have been as I am," he had said one black night, when he had sat in his room staring at the floor. "If a man was dragged out when he had not LIVED a day, he would come back I should come back if--God! A man COULD not be dragged away--like THIS!"

And to sit alone and think of it was an awful and a lonely thing--a lonely thing.

But loneliness was nothing new, only that in these months his had strangely intensified itself. This, though he was not aware of it, was because the soul and body which were the completing parts of him were within reach--and without it. When he went down to breakfast he sat singly at his table, round which twenty people might have laughed and talked. Between the dining-room and the library he spent his days when he was not out of doors. Since he could not afford servants, the many other rooms must be kept closed. It was a ghastly and melancholy thing to make, as he must sometimes, a sort of precautionary visit to the state apartments. He was the last Mount Dunstan, and he would never see them opened again for use, but so long as he lived under the roof he

might by prevision check, in a measure, the too rapid encroachments of decay. To have a leak stopped here, a nail driven or a support put there, seemed decent things to do.

"Whom am I doing it for?" he said to Mr. Penzance. "I am doing it for myself--because I cannot help it. The place seems to me like some gorgeous old warrior come to the end of his days It has stood the war of things for century after century--the war of things. It is going now I am all that is left to it. It is all I have. So I patch it up when I can afford it, with a crutch or a splint and a bandage."

Late in the afternoon of the day on which Miss Vanderpoel rode away from West Ways with Lord Westholt, a stealthy and darkly purple cloud rose, lifting its ominous bulk against a chrysoprase and pink horizon. It was the kind of cloud which speaks of but one thing to those who watch clouds, or even casually consider them. So Lady Anstruthers felt some surprise when she saw Sir Nigel mount his horse before the stone steps and ride away, as it were, into the very heart of the coming storm.

"Nigel will be caught in the rain," she said to her sister. "I wonder why he goes out now. It would be better to wait until to-morrow."

But Sir Nigel did not think so. He had calculated matters with some nicety. He was not exactly on such terms with Mount Dunstan as would make a casual call seem an entirely natural thing, and he wished to drop in upon him for a casual call and in an unpremeditated manner. He

meant to reach the Mount about the time the storm broke, under which circumstance nothing could bear more lightly an air of being unpremeditated than to take refuge in a chance passing.

Mount Dunstan was in the library. He had sat smoking his pipe while he watched the purple cloud roll up and spread itself, blotting out the chrysoprase and pink and blue, and when the branches of the trees began to toss about he had looked on with pleasure as the rush of big rain drops came down and pelted things. It was a fine storm, and there were some imposing claps of thunder and jagged flashes of lightning. As one splendid rattle shook the air he was surprised to hear a summons at the great hall door. Who on earth could be turning up at this time? His man Reeve announced the arrival a few moments later, and it was Sir Nigel Anstruthers. He had, he explained, been riding through the village when the deluge descended, and it had occurred to him to turn in at the park gates and ask a temporary shelter. Mount Dunstan received him with sufficient courtesy. His appearance was not a thing to rejoice over, but it could be endured. Whisky and soda and a smoke would serve to pass the hour, if the storm lasted so long.

Conversation was not the easiest thing in the world under the circumstances, but Sir Nigel led the way steadily after he had taken his seat and accepted the hospitalities offered. What a place it was--this! He had been struck for the hundredth time with the impressiveness of the mass of it, the sweep of the park and the splendid grouping of the timber, as he had ridden up the avenue. There was no other place like it

in the county. Was there another like it in England?

"Not in its case, I hope," Mount Dunstan said.

There were a few seconds of silence. The rain poured down in splashing sheets and was swept in rattling gusts against the window panes.

"What the place needs is--an heiress," Anstruthers observed in the tone of a practical man. "I believe I have heard that your views of things are such that she should preferably NOT be an American."

Mount Dunstan did not smile, though he slightly showed his teeth.

"When I am driven to the wall," he answered, "I may not be fastidious as to nationality."

Nigel Anstruthers' manner was not a bad one. He chose that tone of casual openness which, while it does not wholly commit itself, may be regarded as suggestive of the amiable half confidence of speeches made as "man to man."

"My own opportunity of studying the genus American heiress within my own gates is a first-class one. I find that it knows what it wants and that its intention is to get it." A short laugh broke from him as he flicked the ash from his cigar on to the small bronze receptacle at his elbow. "It is not many years since it would have been difficult for a girl to

be frank enough to say, 'When I marry I shall ask something in exchange for what I have to give.'"

"There are not many who have as much to give," said Mount Dunstan coolly.

"True," with a slight shrug. "You are thinking that men are glad enough to take a girl like that--even one who has not a shape like Diana's and eyes like the sea. Yes, by George," softly, and narrowing his lids, "she IS a handsome creature."

Mount Dunstan did not attempt to refute the statement, and Anstruthers laughed low again.

"It is an asset she knows the value of quite clearly. That is the interesting part of it. She has inherited the far-seeing commercial mind. She does not object to admitting it. She educated herself in delightful cold blood that she might be prepared for the largest prize appearing upon the horizon. She held things in view when she was a child at school, and obviously attacked her French, German, and Italian conjugations with a twelve-year-old eye on the future."

Mount Dunstan leaning back carelessly in his chair, laughed--as it seemed--with him. Internally he was saying that the man was a liar who might always be trusted to lie, but he knew with shamed fury that the lies were doing something to his soul--rolling dark vapours over

it--stinging him, dragging away props, and making him feel they had been foolish things to lean on. This can always be done with a man in love who has slight foundation for hope. For some mysterious and occult reason civilisation has elected to treat the strange and great passion as if it were an unholy and indecent thing, whose dominion over him proper social training prevents any man from admitting openly. In passing through its cruelest phases he must bear himself as if he were immune, and this being the custom, he may be called upon to endure much without the relief of striking out with manly blows. An enemy guessing his case and possessing the infernal gift whose joy is to dishearten and do hurt with courteous despitefulness, may plant a poisoned arrow here and there with neatness and fine touch, while his bound victim can, with decency, neither start, nor utter brave howls, nor guard himself, but must sit still and listen, hospitably supplying smoke and drink and being careful not to make an ass of himself.

Therefore Mount Dunstan pushed the cigars nearer to his visitor and waved his hand hospitably towards the whisky and soda. There was no reason, in fact, why Anstruthers--or any one indeed, but Penzance, should suspect that he had become somewhat mad in secret. The man's talk was marked merely by the lightly disparaging malice which was rarely to be missed from any speech of his which touched on others. Yet it might have been a thing arranged beforehand, to suggest adroitly either lies or truth which would make a man see every sickeningly good reason for feeling that in this contest he did not count for a man at all.

"It has all been pretty obvious," said Sir Nigel. "There is a sort of cynicism in the openness of the siege. My impression is that almost every youngster who has met her has taken a shot. Tommy Alanby scrambling up from his knees in one of the rose-gardens was a satisfying sight. His much-talked-of-passion for Jane Lithcom was temporarily in abeyance."

The rain swirled in a torrent against the window, and casually glancing outside at the tossing gardens he went on.

"She is enjoying herself. Why not? She has the spirit of the huntress. I don't think she talks nonsense about friendship to the captives of her bow and spear. She knows she can always get what she wants. A girl like that MUST have an arrogance of mind. And she is not a young saint. She is one of the women born with THE LOOK in her eyes. I own I should not like to be in the place of any primeval poor brute who really went mad over her--and counted her millions as so much dirt."

Mount Dunstan answered with a shrug of his big shoulders:

"Apparently he would seem as remote from the reason of to-day as the men who lived on the land when Hengist and Horsa came--or when Caesar landed
at Deal."

"He would seem as remote to her," with a shrug also. "I should not like

to contend that his point of view would not interest her or that she would particularly discourage him. Her eyes would call him--without malice or intention, no doubt, but your early Briton ceorl or earl would be as well understood by her. Your New York beauty who has lived in the market place knows principally the prices of things."

He was not ill pleased with himself. He was putting it well and getting rather even with her. If this fellow with his shut mouth had a sore spot hidden anywhere he was giving him "to think." And he would find himself thinking, while, whatsoever he thought, he would be obliged to continue to keep his ugly mouth shut. The great idea was to say things WITHOUT saying them, to set your hearer's mind to saying them for you.

"What strikes one most is a sort of commercial brilliance in her," taking up his thread again after a smilingly reflective pause. "It quite exhilarates one by its novelty. There's spice in it. We English have not a look-in when we are dealing with Americans, and yet France calls us a nation of shopkeepers. My impression is that their women take little inventories of every house they enter, of every man they meet. I heard her once speaking to my wife about this place, as if she had lived in it. She spoke of the closed windows and the state of the gardens--of broken fountains and fallen arches. She evidently deplored the deterioration of things which represented capital. She has inventoried Dunholm, no doubt. That will give Westholt a chance. But she will do nothing until after her next year's season in London--that I'd swear. I look forward to next year. It will be worth watching. She has been

training my wife. A sister who has married an Englishman and has at least spent some years of her life in England has a certain established air. When she is presented one knows she will be a sensation. After that----" he hesitated a moment, smiling not too pleasantly.

"After that," said Mount Dunstan, "the Deluge."

"Exactly. The Deluge which usually sweeps girls off their feet--but it will not sweep her off hers. She will stand quite firm in the flood and lose sight of nothing of importance which floats past."

Mount Dunstan took him up. He was sick of hearing the fellow's voice.

"There will be a good many things," he said; "there will be great personages and small ones, pomps and vanities, glittering things and heavy ones."

"When she sees what she wants," said Anstruthers, "she will hold out her hand, knowing it will come to her. The things which drown will not disturb her. I once made the blunder of suggesting that she might need protection against the importunate--as if she had been an English girl. It was an idiotic thing to do."

"Because?" Mount Dunstan for the moment had lost his head. Anstruthers had maddeningly paused.

"She answered that if it became necessary she might perhaps be able to protect herself. She was as cool and frank as a boy. No air pince about it--merely consciousness of being able to put things in their right places. Made a mere male relative feel like a fool."

"When ARE things in their right places?" To his credit be it spoken, Mount Dunstan managed to say it as if in the mere putting together of idle words. What man likes to be reminded of his right place! No man wants to be put in his right place. There is always another place which seems more desirable.

"She knows--if we others do not. I suppose my right place is at Stornham, conducting myself as the brother-in-law of a fair American should. I suppose yours is here--shut up among your closed corridors and locked doors. There must be a lot of them in a house like this. Don't you sometimes feel it too large for you?"

"Always," answered Mount Dunstan.

The fact that he added nothing else and met a rapid side glance with unmoving red-brown eyes gazing out from under rugged brows, perhaps irritated Anstruthers. He had been rather enjoying himself, but he had not enjoyed himself enough. There was no denying that his plaything had not openly flinched. Plainly he was not good at flinching. Anstruthers wondered how far a man might go. He tried again.

"She likes the place, though she has a natural disdain for its condition. That is practical American. Things which are going to pieces because money is not spent upon them--mere money, of which all the people who count for anything have so much--are inevitably rather disdained. They are 'out of it.' But she likes the estate." As he watched Mount Dunstan he felt sure he had got it at last--the right thing. "If you were a duke with fifty thousand a year," with a distinctly nasty, amicably humorous, faint laugh, "she would--by the Lord, I believe, she would take it over--and you with it."

Mount Dunstan got up. In his rough walking tweeds he looked over-big--and heavy--and perilous. For two seconds Nigel Anstruthers would not have been surprised if he had without warning slapped his face, or knocked him over, or whirled him out of his chair and kicked him. He would not have liked it, but--for two seconds--it would have been no surprise. In fact, he instinctively braced his not too firm muscles. But nothing of the sort occurred. During the two seconds--perhaps three--Mount Dunstan stood still and looked down at him. The brief space at an end, he walked over to the hearth and stood with his back to the big fireplace.

"You don't like her," he said, and his manner was that of a man dealing with a matter of fact. "Why do you talk about her?"

He had got away again--quite away.

An ugly flush shot over Anstruthers' face. There was one more thing to say--whether it was idiotic to say it or not. Things can always be denied afterwards, should denial appear necessary--and for the moment his special devil possessed him.

"I do not like her!" And his mouth twisted. "Do I not? I am not an old woman. I am a man--like others. I chance to like her--too much."

There was a short silence. Mount Dunstan broke it.

"Then," he remarked, "you had better emigrate to some country with a climate which suits you. I should say that England--for the present--does not."

"I shall stay where I am," answered Anstruthers, with a slight hoarseness of voice, which made it necessary for him to clear his throat. "I shall stay where she is. I will have that satisfaction, at least. She does not mind. I am only a racketty, middle-aged brother-in-law, and she can take care of herself. As I told you, she has the spirit of the huntress."

"Look here," said Mount Dunstan, quite without haste, and with an iron civility. "I am going to take the liberty of suggesting something. If this thing is true, it would be as well not to talk about it."

"As well for me--or for her?" and there was a serene significance in the

query.

Mount Dunstan thought a few seconds.

"I confess," he said slowly, and he planted his fine blow between the eyes well and with directness. "I confess that it would not have occurred to me to ask you to do anything or refrain from doing it for her sake."

"Thank you. Perhaps you are right. One learns that one must protect one's self. I shall not talk--neither will you. I know that. I was a fool to let it out. The storm is over. I must ride home." He rose from his seat and stood smiling. "It would smash up things nicely if the new beauty's appearance in the great world were preceded by chatter of the unseemly affection of some adorer of ill repute. Unfairly enough it is always the woman who is hurt."

"Unless," said Mount Dunstan civilly, "there should arise the poor, primeval brute, in his neolithic wrath, to seize on the man to blame, and break every bone and sinew in his damned body."

"The newspapers would enjoy that more than she would," answered Sir Nigel. "She does not like the newspapers. They are too ready to disparage the multi-millionaire, and cackle about members of his family."

The unhidden hatred which still professed to hide itself in the depths of their pupils, as they regarded each other, had its birth in a passion as elemental as the quakings of the earth, or the rage of two lions in a desert, lashing their flanks in the blazing sun. It was well that at this moment they should part ways.

Sir Nigel's horse being brought, he went on the way which was his.

"It was a mistake to say what I did," he said before going. "I ought to have held my tongue. But I am under the same roof with her. At any rate, that is a privilege no other man shares with me."

He rode off smartly, his horse's hoofs splashing in the rain pools left in the avenue after the storm. He was not so sure after all that he had made a mistake, and for the moment he was not in the mood to care whether he had made one or not. His agreeable smile showed itself as he thought of the obstinate, proud brute he had left behind, sitting alone among his shut doors and closed corridors. They had not shaken hands either at meeting or parting. Queer thing it was--the kind of enmity a man could feel for another when he was upset by a woman. It was amusing enough that it should be she who was upsetting him after all these years--impudent little Betty, with the ferocious manner.