

## CHAPTER XXXIX

### ON THE MARSHES

THE marshes stretched mellow in the autumn sun, sheep wandered about, nibbling contentedly, or lay down to rest in groups, the sky reflecting itself in the narrow dykes gave a blue colour to the water, a scent of the sea was in the air as one breathed it, flocks of plover rose, now and then, crying softly. Betty, walking with her dog, had passed a heron standing at the edge of a pool.

From her first discovery of them, she had been attracted by the marshes with their English suggestion of the Roman Campagna, their broad expanse of level land spread out to the sun and wind, the thousands of white sheep dotted or clustered as far as eye could reach, the hues of the marsh grass and the plants growing thick at the borders of the strips of water. Its beauty was all its own and curiously aloof from the softly-wooded, undulating world about it. Driving or walking along the high road--the road the Romans had built to London town long centuries ago--on either side of one were meadows, farms, scattered cottages, and hop gardens, but beyond and below stretched the marsh land, golden and grey, and always alluring one by its silence.

"I never pass it without wanting to go to it--to take solitary walks over it, to be one of the spots on it as the sheep are. It seems as if, lying there under the blue sky or the low grey clouds with all the world

held at bay by mere space and stillness, they must feel something we know nothing of. I want to go and find out what it is."

This she had once said to Mount Dunstan.

So she had fallen into the habit of walking there with her dog at her side as her sole companion, for having need for time and space for thought, she had found them in the silence and aloofness.

Life had been a vivid and pleasurable thing to her, as far as she could look back upon it. She began to realise that she must have been very happy, because she had never found herself desiring existence other than such as had come to her day by day. Except for her passionate childish regret at Rosy's marriage, she had experienced no painful feeling. In fact, she had faced no hurt in her life, and certainly had been confronted by no limitations. Arguing that girls in their teens usually fall in love, her father had occasionally wondered that she passed through no little episodes of sentiment, but the fact was that her interests had been larger and more numerous than the interests of girls generally are, and her affectionate intimacy with himself had left no such small vacant spaces as are frequently filled by unimportant young emotions. Because she was a logical creature, and had watched life and those living it with clear and interested eyes, she had not been blind to the path which had marked itself before her during the summer's growth and waning. She had not, at first, perhaps, known exactly when things began to change for her--when the clarity of her mind began to be

disturbed. She had thought in the beginning--as people have a habit of doing--that an instance--a problem--a situation had attracted her attention because it was absorbing enough to think over. Her view of the matter had been that as the same thing would have interested her father, it had interested herself. But from the morning when she had been conscious of the sudden fury roused in her by Nigel Anstruthers' ugly sneer at Mount Dunstan, she had better understood the thing which had come upon her. Day by day it had increased and gathered power, and she realised with a certain sense of impatience that she had not in any degree understood it when she had seen and wondered at its effect on other women. Each day had been like a wave encroaching farther upon the shore she stood upon. At the outset a certain ignoble pride--she knew it ignoble--filled her with rebellion. She had seen so much of this kind of situation, and had heard so much of the general comment. People had learned how to sneer because experience had taught them. If she gave them cause, why should they not sneer at her as at things? She recalled what she had herself thought of such things--the folly of them, the obviousness--the almost deserved disaster. She had arrogated to herself judgment of women--and men--who might, yes, who might have stood upon their strip of sand, as she stood, with the waves creeping in, each one higher, stronger, and more engulfing than the last. There might have been those among them who also had knowledge of that sudden deadly joy at the sight of one face, at the drop of one voice. When that wave submerged one's pulsing being, what had the world to do with one--how could one hear and think of what its speech might be? Its voice clamoured too far off.

As she walked across the marsh she was thinking this first phase over. She had reached a new one, and at first she looked back with a faint, even rather hard, smile. She walked straight ahead, her mastiff, Roland, padding along heavily close at her side. How still and wide and golden it was; how the cry of plover and lifting trill of skylark assured one that one was wholly encircled by solitude and space which were more enclosing than any walls! She was going to the mounds to which Mr. Penzance had trundled G. Selden in the pony chaise, when he had given him the marvellous hour which had brought Roman camp and Roman legions to life again. Up on the largest hillock one could sit enthroned, resting chin in hand and looking out under level lids at the unstirring, softly-living loveliness of the marsh-land world. So she was presently seated, with her heavy-limbed Roland at her feet. She had come here to try to put things clearly to herself, to plan with such reason as she could control. She had begun to be unhappy, she had begun--with some unfairness--to look back upon the Betty Vanderpoel of the past as an unwittingly self-sufficient young woman, to find herself suddenly entangled by things, even to know a touch of desperateness.

"Not to take a remnant from the ducal bargain counter," she was saying mentally. That was why her smile was a little hard. What if the remnant from the ducal bargain counter had prejudices of his own?

"If he were passionately--passionately in love with me," she said, with

red staining her cheeks, "he would not come--he would not come--he would not come. And, because of that, he is more to me--MORE! And more he will become every day--and the more strongly he will hold me. And there we stand."

Roland lifted his fine head from his paws, and, holding it erect on a stiff, strong neck, stared at her in obvious inquiry. She put out her hand and tenderly patted him.

"He will have none of me," she said. "He will have none of me." And she faintly smiled, but the next instant shook her head a little haughtily, and, having done so, looked down with an altered expression upon the cloth of her skirt, because she had shaken upon it, from the extravagant lashes, two clear drops.

It was not the result of chance that she had seen nothing of him for weeks. She had not attempted to persuade herself of that. Twice he had declined an invitation to Stornham, and once he had ridden past her on the road when he might have stopped to exchange greetings, or have ridden on by her side. He did not mean to seem to desire, ever so lightly, to be counted as in the lists. Whether he was drawn by any liking for her or not, it was plain he had determined on this.

If she were to go away now, they would never meet again. Their ways in this world would part forever. She would not know how long it took to break him utterly--if such a man could be broken. If no magic change

took place in his fortunes--and what change could come?--the decay about him would spread day by day. Stone walls last a long time, so the house would stand while every beauty and stateliness within it fell into ruin. Gardens would become wildernesses, terraces and fountains crumble and be overgrown, walls that were to-day leaning would fall with time. The years would pass, and his youth with them; he would gradually change into an old man while he watched the things he loved with passion die slowly and hard. How strange it was that lives should touch and pass on the ocean of Time, and nothing should result--nothing at all! When she went on her way, it would be as if a ship loaded with every aid of food and treasure had passed a boat in which a strong man tossed, starving to death, and had not even run up a flag.

"But one cannot run up a flag," she said, stroking Roland. "One cannot. There we stand."

To her recognition of this deadlock of Fate, there had been adding the growing disturbance caused by yet another thing which was increasingly troubling, increasingly difficult to face.

Gradually, and at first with wonderful naturalness of bearing, Nigel Anstruthers had managed to create for himself a singular place in her everyday life. It had begun with a certain personalness in his attitude, a personalness which was a thing to dislike, but almost impossible openly to resent. Certainly, as a self-invited guest in his house, she could scarcely protest against the amiability of his demeanour and his

exterior courtesy and attentiveness of manner in his conduct towards her. She had tried to sweep away the objectionable quality in his bearing, by frankness, by indifference, by entire lack of response, but she had remained conscious of its increasing as a spider's web might increase as the spider spun it quietly over one, throwing out threads so impalpable that one could not brush them away because they were too slight to be seen. She was aware that in the first years of his married life he had alternately resented the scarcity of the invitations sent them and rudely refused such as were received. Since he had returned to find her at Stornham, he had insisted that no invitations should be declined, and had escorted his wife and herself wherever they went. What could have been conventionally more proper--what more improper than that he should have persistently have remained at home? And yet there came a time when, as they three drove together at night in the closed carriage, Betty was conscious that, as he sat opposite to her in the dark, when he spoke, when he touched her in arranging the robe over her, or opening or shutting the window, he subtly, but persistently, conveyed that the personalness of his voice, look, and physical nearness was a sort of hideous confidence between them which they were cleverly concealing from Rosalie and the outside world.

When she rode about the country, he had a way of appearing at some turning and making himself her companion, riding too closely at her side, and assuming a noticeable air of being engaged in meaningly confidential talk. Once, when he had been leaning towards her with an audaciously tender manner, they had been passed by the Dunholm carriage,

and Lady Dunholm and the friend driving with her had evidently tried not to look surprised. Lady Alanby, meeting them in the same way at another time, had put up her glasses and stared in open disapproval. She might admire a strikingly handsome American girl, but her favour would not last through any such vulgar silliness as flirtations with disgraceful brothers-in-law. When Betty strolled about the park or the lanes, she much too often encountered Sir Nigel strolling also, and knew that he did not mean to allow her to rid herself of him. In public, he made a point of keeping observably close to her, of hovering in her vicinity and looking on at all she did with eyes she rebelled against finding fixed on her each time she was obliged to turn in his direction. He had a fashion of coming to her side and speaking in a dropped voice, which excluded others, as a favoured lover might. She had seen both men and women glance at her in half-embarrassment at their sudden sense of finding themselves slightly *de trop*. She had said aloud to him on one such occasion--and she had said it with smiling casualness for the benefit of Lady Alanby, to whom she had been talking:

"Don't alarm me by dropping your voice, Nigel. I am easily frightened--and Lady Alanby will think we are conspirators."

For an instant he was taken by surprise. He had been pleased to believe that there was no way in which she could defend herself, unless she would condescend to something stupidly like a scene. He flushed and drew himself up.



"I beg your pardon, my dear Betty," he said, and walked away with the manner of an offended adorer, leaving her to realise an odiously unpleasant truth--which is that there are incidents only made more inexplicable by an effort to explain. She saw also that he was quite aware of this, and that his offended departure was a brilliant inspiration, and had left her, as it were, in the lurch. To have said to Lady Alanby: "My brother-in-law, in whose house I am merely staying for my sister's sake, is trying to lead you to believe that I allow him to make love to me," would have suggested either folly or insanity on her own part. As it was--after a glance at Sir Nigel's stiffly retreating back--Lady Alanby merely looked away with a wholly uninviting expression.

When Betty spoke to him afterwards, haughtily and with determination, he laughed.

"My dearest girl," he said, "if I watch you with interest and drop my voice when I get a chance to speak to you, I only do what every other man does, and I do it because you are an alluring young woman--which no one is more perfectly aware of than yourself. Your pretence that you do not know you are alluring is the most captivating thing about you. And what do you think of doing if I continue to offend you? Do you propose to desert us--to leave poor Rosalie to sink back again into the bundle of old clothes she was when you came? For Heaven's sake, don't do that!"

All that his words suggested took form before her vividly. How well he

understood what he was saying. But she answered him bravely.

"No. I do not mean to do that."

He watched her for a few seconds. There was curiosity in his eyes.

"Don't make the mistake of imagining that I will let my wife go with you to America," he said next. "She is as far off from that as she was when I brought her to Stornham. I have told her so. A man cannot tie his wife to the bedpost in these days, but he can make her efforts to leave him so decidedly unpleasant that decent women prefer to stay at home and take what is coming. I have seen that often enough 'to bank on it,' if I may quote your American friends."

"Do you remember my once saying," Betty remarked, "that when a woman has been PROPERLY ill-treated the time comes when nothing matters--nothing but release from the life she loathes?"

"Yes," he answered. "And to you nothing would matter but--excuse my saying it--your own damnable, headstrong pride. But Rosalie is different. Everything matters to her. And you will find it so, my dear girl."

And that this was at least half true was brought home to her by the fact that late the same night Rosy came to her white with crying.

"It is not your fault, Betty," she said. "Don't think that I think it is your fault, but he has been in my room in one of those humours when he seems like a devil. He thinks you will go back to America and try to take me with you. But, Betty, you must not think about me. It will be better for you to go. I have seen you again. I have had you for--for a time. You will be safer at home with father and mother."

Betty laid a hand on her shoulder and looked at her fixedly.

"What is it, Rosy?" she said. "What is it he does to you--that makes you like this?"

"I don't know--but that he makes me feel that there is nothing but evil and lies in the world and nothing can help one against them. Those things he says about everyone--men and women--things one can't repeat--make me sick. And when I try to deny them, he laughs."

"Does he say things about me?" Betty inquired, very quietly, and suddenly Rosalie threw her arms round her.

"Betty, darling," she cried, "go home--go home. You must not stay here."

"When I go, you will go with me," Betty answered. "I am not going back to mother without you."

She made a collection of many facts before their interview was at an end, and they parted for the night. Among the first was that Nigel had prepared for certain possibilities as wise holders of a fortress prepare for siege. A rather long sitting alone over whisky and soda had, without making him loquacious, heated his blood in such a manner as led him to be less subtle than usual. Drink did not make him drunk, but malignant, and when a man is in the malignant mood, he forgets his cleverness. So he revealed more than he absolutely intended. It was to be gathered that he did not mean to permit his wife to leave him, even for a visit; he would not allow himself to be made ridiculous by such a thing. A man who could not control his wife was a fool and deserved to be a laughing-stock. As Ughtred and his future inheritance seemed to have become of interest to his grandfather, and were to be well nursed and taken care of, his intention was that the boy should remain under his own supervision. He could amuse himself well enough at Stornham, now that it had been put in order, if it was kept up properly and he filled it with people who did not bore him. There were people who did not bore him--plenty of them. Rosalie would stay where she was and receive his guests. If she imagined that the little episode of Ffolliott had been entirely dormant, she was mistaken. He knew where the man was, and exactly how serious it would be to him if scandal was stirred up. He had been at some trouble to find out. The fellow had recently had the luck to fall into a very fine living. It had been bestowed on him by the old Duke of Broadmorlands, who was the most strait-laced old boy in England. He had become so in his disgust at the light behaviour of the wife he had divorced in his early manhood. Nigel cackled gently as he detailed

that, by an agreeable coincidence, it happened that her Grace had suddenly become filled with pious fervour--roused thereto by a good-looking locum tenens--result, painful discoveries--the pair being now rumoured to be keeping a lodging-house together somewhere in Australia. A word to good old Broadmorlands would produce the effect of a lighted match on a barrel of gunpowder. It would be the end of Ffolliott. Neither would it be a good introduction to Betty's first season in London, neither would it be enjoyed by her mother, whom he remembered as a woman with primitive views of domestic rectitude. He smiled the awful smile as he took out of his pocket the envelope containing the words his wife had written to Mr. Ffolliott, "Do not come to the house. Meet me at Bartyon Wood." It did not take much to convince people, if one managed things with decent forethought. The Brents, for instance, were fond neither of her nor of Betty, and they had never forgotten the questionable conduct of their locum tenens. Then, suddenly, he had changed his manner and had sat down, laughing, and drawn Rosalie to his knee and kissed her--yes, he had kissed her and told her not to look like a little fool or act like one. Nothing unpleasant would happen if she behaved herself. Betty had improved her greatly, and she had grown young and pretty again. She looked quite like a child sometimes, now that her bones were covered and she dressed well. If she wanted to please him she could put her arms round his neck and kiss him, as he had kissed her.

"That is what has made you look white," said Betty.

"Yes. There is something about him that sometimes makes you feel as if the very blood in your veins turned white," answered Rosy--in a low voice, which the next moment rose. "Don't you see--don't you see," she broke out, "that to displease him would be like murdering Mr. Ffolliott--like murdering his mother and mine--and like murdering Ughtred, because he would be killed by the shame of things--and by being taken from me. We have loved each other so much--so much. Don't you see?"

"I see all that rises up before you," Betty said, "and I understand your feeling that you cannot save yourself by bringing ruin upon an innocent man who helped you. I realise that one must have time to think it over. But, Rosy," a sudden ring in her voice, "I tell you there is a way out--there is a way out! The end of the misery is coming--and it will not be what he thinks."

"You always believe----" began Rosy.

"I know," answered Betty. "I know there are some things so bad that they cannot go on. They kill themselves through their own evil. I KNOW! I KNOW! That is all."