

## CHAPTER LX

"DON'T GO ON WITH THIS"

Of these things, as of others, she had come to her solitude to think. She looked out over the marshes scarcely seeing the wandering or resting sheep, scarcely hearing the crying plover, because so much seemed to confront her, and she must look it all well in the face. She had fulfilled the promise she had made to herself as a child. She had come in search of Rosy, she had found her as simple and loving of heart as she had ever been. The most painful discoveries she had made had been concealed from her mother until their aspect was modified. Mrs. Vanderpoel need now feel no shock at the sight of the restored Rosy. Lady Anstruthers had been still young enough to respond both physically and mentally to love, companionship, agreeable luxuries, and stimulating interests. But for Nigel's antagonism there was now no reason why she should not be taken home for a visit to her family, and her long-yearned-for New York, no reason why her father and mother should not come to Stornham, and thus establish the customary social relations between their daughter's home and their own. That this seemed out of the question was owing to the fact that at the outset of his married life Sir Nigel had allowed himself to commit errors in tactics. A perverse egotism, not wholly normal in its rancour, had led him into deeds which he had begun to suspect of having cost him too much, even before Betty herself had pointed out to him their unbusinesslike indiscretion. He had done things he could not undo, and now, to his mind, his only resource

was to treat them boldly as having been the proper results of decision founded on sound judgment, which he had no desire to excuse. A sufficiently arrogant loftiness of bearing would, he hoped, carry him through the matter. This Betty herself had guessed, but she had not realised that this loftiness of attitude was in danger of losing some of its effectiveness through his being increasingly stung and spurred by circumstances and feelings connected with herself, which were at once exasperating and at times almost overpowering. When, in his mingled dislike and admiration, he had begun to study his sister-in-law, and the half-amused weaving of the small plots which would make things sufficiently unpleasant to be used as factors in her removal from the scene, if necessary, he had not calculated, ever so remotely, on the chance of that madness besetting him which usually besets men only in their youth. He had imagined no other results to himself than a subtly-exciting private entertainment, such as would give spice to the dullness of virtuous life in the country. But, despite himself and his intentions, he had found the situation alter. His first uncertainty of himself had arisen at the Dunholm ball, when he had suddenly realised that he was detesting men who, being young and free, were at liberty to pay gallant court to the new beauty.

Perhaps the most disturbing thing to him had been his consciousness of his sudden leap of antagonism towards Mount Dunstan, who, despite his obvious lack of chance, somehow especially roused in him the rage of warring male instinct. There had been admissions he had been forced, at length, to make to himself. You could not, it appeared, live in the

house with a splendid creature like this one--with her brilliant eyes, her beauty of line and movement before you every hour, her bloom, her proud fineness holding themselves wholly in their own keeping--without there being the devil to pay. Lately he had sometimes gone hot and cold in realising that, having once told himself that he might choose to decide to get rid of her, he now knew that the mere thought of her sailing away of her own choice was maddening to him. There WAS the devil to pay! It sometimes brought back to him that hideous shakiness of nerve which had been a feature of his illness when he had been on the Riviera with Teresita.

Of all this Betty only knew the outward signs which, taken at their exterior significance, were detestable enough, and drove her hard as she mentally dwelt on them in connection with other things. How easy, if she stood alone, to defy his evil insolence to do its worst, and leaving the place at an hour's notice, to sail away to protection, or, if she chose to remain in England, to surround herself with a bodyguard of the people in whose eyes his disrepute relegated a man such as Nigel Anstruthers to powerless nonentity. Alone, she could have smiled and turned her back upon him. But she was here to take care of Rosy. She occupied a position something like that of a woman who remains with a man and endures outrage because she cannot leave her child. That thought, in itself, brought Ughtred to her mind. There was Ughtred to be considered as well as his mother. Ughtred's love for and faith in her were deep and passionate things. He fed on her tenderness for him, and had grown stronger because he spent hours of each day talking, reading, and

driving with her. The simple truth was that neither she nor Rosalie could desert Ughtred, and so long as Nigel managed cleverly enough, the law would give the boy to his father.

"You are obliged to prove things, you know, in a court of law," he had said, as if with casual amiability, on a certain occasion. "Proving things is the devil. People lose their tempers and rush into rows which end in lawsuits, and then find they can prove nothing. If I were a villain," slightly showing his teeth in an agreeable smile--"instead of a man of blameless life, I should go in only for that branch of my profession which could be exercised without leaving stupid evidence behind."

Since his return to Stornham the outward decorum of his own conduct had entertained him and he had kept it up with an increasing appreciation of its usefulness in the present situation. Whatsoever happened in the end, it was the part of discretion to present to the rural world about him an appearance of upright behaviour. He had even found it amusing to go to church and also to occasionally make amiable calls at the vicarage. It was not difficult, at such times, to refer delicately to his regret that domestic discomfort had led him into the error of remaining much away from Stornham. He knew that he had been even rather touching in his expression of interest in the future of his son, and the necessity of the boy's being protected from uncontrolled hysteric influences. And, in the years of Rosalie's unprotected wretchedness, he had taken excellent care that no "stupid evidence" should be exposed to view.

Of all this Betty was thinking and summing up definitely, point after point. Where was the wise and practical course of defence? The most unthinkable thing was that one could find one's self in a position in which action seemed inhibited. What could one do? To send for her father would surely end the matter--but at what cost to Rosy, to Ughtred, to Ffolliott, before whom the fair path to dignified security had so newly opened itself? What would be the effect of sudden confusion, anguish, and public humiliation upon Rosalie's carefully rebuilt health and strength--upon her mother's new hope and happiness? At moments it seemed as if almost all that had been done might be undone. She was beset by such a moment now, and felt for the time, at least, like a creature tied hand and foot while in full strength.

Certainly she was not prepared for the event which happened. Roland stiffened his ears, and, beginning a rumbling growl, ended it suddenly, realising it an unnecessary precaution.

He knew the man walking up the incline of the mound from the side behind them. So did Betty know him. It was Sir Nigel looking rather glowering and pale and walking slowly. He had discovered where she had meant to take refuge, and had probably ridden to some point where he could leave his horse and follow her at the expense of taking a short cut which saved walking.

As he climbed the mound to join her, Betty rose to her feet.

"My dear girl," he said, "don't get up as if you meant to go away. It has cost me some exertion to find you."

"It will not cost you any exertion to lose me," was her light answer. "I AM going away."

He had reached her, and stood still before her with scarcely a yard's distance between them. He was slightly out of breath and even a trifle livid. He leaned on his stick and his look at her combined leaping bad temper with something deeper.

"Look here!" he broke out, "why do you make such a point of treating me like the devil?"

Betty felt her heart give a hastened beat, not of fear, but of repulsion. This was the mood and manner which subjugated Rosalie. He had so raised his voice that two men in the distance, who might be either labourers or sportsmen, hearing its high tone, glanced curiously towards them.

"Why do you ask me a question which is totally absurd?" she said.

"It is not absurd," he answered. "I am speaking of facts, and I intend

to come to some understanding about them."

For reply, after meeting his look a few seconds, she simply turned her back and began to walk away. He followed and overtook her.

"I shall go with you, and I shall say what I want to say," he persisted.

"If you hasten your pace I shall hasten mine. I cannot exactly see you running away from me across the marsh, screaming. You wouldn't care to be rescued by those men over there who are watching us. I should explain myself to them in terms neither you nor Rosalie would enjoy. There! I knew Rosalie's name would pull you up. Good God! I wish I were a weak fool with a magnificent creature protecting me at all risks."

If she had not had blood and fire in her veins, she might have found it easy to answer calmly. But she had both, and both leaped and beat furiously for a few seconds. It was only human that it should be so. But she was more than a passionate girl of high and trenchant spirit, and she had learned, even in the days at the French school, what he had never been able to learn in his life--self-control. She held herself in as she would have held in a horse of too great fire and action. She was actually able to look--as the first Reuben Vanderpoel would have looked--at her capital of resource. But it meant taut holding of the reins.

"Will you tell me," she said, stopping, "what it is you want?"

"I want to talk to you. I want to tell you truths you would rather be told here than on the high road, where people are passing--or at Stornham, where the servants would overhear and Rosalie be thrown into hysterics. You will NOT run screaming across the marsh, because I should run screaming after you, and we should both look silly. Here is a rather scraggy tree. Will you sit on the mound near it--for Rosalie's sake?"

"I will not sit down," replied Betty, "but I will listen, because it is not a bad idea that I should understand you. But to begin with, I will tell you something." She stopped beneath the tree and stood with her back against its trunk. "I pick up things by noticing people closely, and I have realised that all your life you have counted upon getting your own way because you saw that people--especially women--have a horror of public scenes, and will submit to almost anything to avoid them. That is true very often, but not always."

Her eyes, which were well opened, were quite the blue of steel, and rested directly upon him. "I, for instance, would let you make a scene with me anywhere you chose--in Bond Street--in Piccadilly--on the steps of Buckingham Palace, as I was getting out of my carriage to attend a drawing-room--and you would gain nothing you wanted by it--nothing. You may place entire confidence in that statement."

He stared back at her, momentarily half-magnetised, and then broke forth into a harsh half-laugh.



"You are so damned handsome that nothing else matters. I'm hanged if it does!" and the words were an exclamation. He drew still nearer to her, speaking with a sort of savagery. "Cannot you see that you could do what you pleased with me? You are too magnificent a thing for a man to withstand. I have lost my head and gone to the devil through you. That is what I came to say."

In the few seconds of silence that followed, his breath came quickly again and he was even paler than before.

"You came to me to say THAT?" asked Betty.

"Yes--to say it before you drove me to other things."

Her gaze was for a moment even slightly wondering. He presented the curious picture of a cynical man of the world, for the time being ruled and impelled only by the most primitive instincts. To a clear-headed modern young woman of the most powerful class, he--her sister's husband--was making threatening love as if he were a savage chief and she a savage beauty of his tribe. All that concerned him was that he should speak and she should hear--that he should show her he was the stronger of the two.

"Are you QUITE mad?" she said.

"Not quite," he answered; "only three parts--but I am beyond my own

control. That is the best proof of what has happened to me. You are an arrogant piece and you would defy me if you stood alone, but you don't, and, by the Lord! I have reached a point where I will make use of every lever I can lay my hand on--yourself, Rosalie, Ughtred, Ffolliott--the whole lot of you!"

The thing which was hardest upon her was her knowledge of her own strength--of what she might have allowed herself of flaming words and instant action--but for the memory of Rosy's ghastly little face, as it had looked when she cried out, "You must not think of me. Betty, go home--go home!" She held the white desperation of it before her mental vision and answered him even with a certain interested deliberateness.

"Do you know," she inquired, "that you are talking to me as though you were the villain in the melodrama?"

"There is an advantage in that," he answered, with an unholy smile. "If you repeat what I say, people will only think that you are indulging in hysterical exaggeration. They don't believe in the existence of melodrama in these days."

The cynical, absolute knowledge of this revealed so much that nerve was required to face it with steadiness.

"True," she commented. "Now I think I understand."

"No, you don't," he burst forth. "You have spent your life standing on a golden pedestal, being kowtowed to, and you imagine yourself immune from difficulties because you think you can pay your way out of anything. But you will find that you cannot pay your way out of this--or rather you cannot pay Rosalie's way out of it."

"I shall not try. Go on," said the girl. "What I do not understand, you must explain to me. Don't leave anything unsaid."

"Good God, what a woman you are!" he cried out bitterly. He had never seen such beauty in his life as he saw in her as she stood with her straight young body flat against the tree. It was not a matter of deep colour of eye, or high spirit of profile--but of something which burned him. Still as she was, she looked like a flame. She made him feel old and body-worn, and all the more senselessly furious.

"I believe you hate me," he raged. "And I may thank my wife for that." Then he lost himself entirely. "Why cannot you behave well to me? If you will behave well to me, Rosalie shall go her own way. If you even looked at me as you look at other men--but you do not. There is always something under your lashes which watches me as if I were a wild beast you were studying. Don't fancy yourself a dompteuse. I am not your man. I swear to you that you don't know what you are dealing with. I swear to you that if you play this game with me I will drag you two down if I drag myself with you. I have nothing much to lose. You and your sister have everything."

"Go on," Betty said briefly.

"Go on! Yes, I will go on. Rosalie and Ffolliott I hold in the hollow of my hand. As for you--do you know that people are beginning to discuss you? Gossip is easily stirred in the country, where people are so bored that they chatter in self-defence. I have been considered a bad lot. I have become curiously attached to my sister-in-law. I am seen hanging about her, hanging over her as we ride or walk alone together. An American young woman is not like an English girl--she is used to seeing the marriage ceremony juggled with. There's a trifle of prejudice against such young women when they are too rich and too handsome. Don't look at me like that!" he burst forth, with maddened sharpness, "I won't have it!"

The girl was regarding him with the expression he most resented--the reflection of a normal person watching an abnormal one, and studying his abnormality.

"Do you know that you are raving?" she said, with quiet curiosity--"raving?"

Suddenly he sat down on the low mound near him, and as he touched his forehead with his handkerchief, she saw that his hand actually shook.

"Yes," he answered, panting, "but 'ware my ravings! They mean what they

say."

"You do yourself an injury when you give way to them"--steadily, even with a touch of slow significance--"a physical injury. I have noticed that more than once."

He sprang to his feet again. Every drop of blood left his face. For a second he looked as if he would strike her. His arm actually flung itself out--and fell.

"You devil!" he gasped. "You count on that? You she-devil!"

She left her tree and stood before him.

"Listen to me," she said. "You intimate that you have been laying melodramatic plots against me which will injure my good name. That is rubbish. Let us leave it at that. You threaten that you will break Rosy's heart and take her child from her, you say also that you will wound and hurt my mother to her death and do your worst to ruin an honest man----"

"And, by God, I will!" he raged. "And you cannot stop me, if----"

"I do not know whether I can stop you or not, though you may be sure I will try," she interrupted him, "but that is not what I was going to say." She drew a step nearer, and there was something in the intensity

of her look which fascinated and held him for a moment. She was curiously grave. "Nigel, I believe in certain things you do not believe in. I believe black thoughts breed black ills to those who think them. It is not a new idea. There is an old Oriental proverb which says, 'Curses, like chickens, come home to roost.' I believe also that the worst--the very worst CANNOT be done to those who think steadily--steadily--only of the best. To you that is merely superstition to be laughed at. That is a matter of opinion. But--don't go on with this thing--DON'T GO ON WITH IT. Stop and think it over."

He stared at her furiously--tried to laugh outright, and failed because the look in her eyes was so odd in its strength and stillness.

"You think you can lay some weird spell upon me," he jeered sardonically.

"No, I don't," she answered. "I could not if I would. It is no affair of mine. It is your affair only--and there is nothing weird about it. Don't go on, I tell you. Think better of it."

She turned about without further speech, and walked away from him with light swiftness over the marsh. Oddly enough, he did not even attempt to follow her. He felt a little weak--perhaps because a certain thing she had said had brought back to him a familiar touch of the horrors. She had the eyes of a falcon under the odd, soft shade of the extraordinary lashes. She had seen what he thought no one but himself had realised.

Having watched her retreating figure for a few seconds, he sat down--as suddenly as before--on the mound near the tree.

"Oh, damn her!" he said, his damp forehead on his hands. "Damn the whole universe!"

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When Betty and Roland reached Stornham, the wicker-work pony chaise from the vicarage stood before the stone entrance steps. The drawing-room door was open, and Mrs. Brent was standing near it saying some last words to Lady Anstruthers before leaving the house, after a visit evidently made with an object. This Betty gathered from the solemnity of her manner.

"Betty," said Lady Anstruthers, catching sight of her, "do come in for a moment."

When Betty entered, both her sister and Mrs. Brent looked at her questioningly.

"You look a little pale and tired, Miss Vanderpoel," Mrs. Brent said, rather as if in haste to be the first to speak. "I hope you are not at all unwell. We need all our strength just now. I have brought the most painful news. Malignant typhoid fever has broken out among the hop

pickers on the Mount Dunstan estate. Some poor creature was evidently sickening for it when he came from London. Three people died last night."