

## CHAPTER XLI

### SHE WOULD DO SOMETHING

Sir Nigel's face was not a good thing to see when he appeared at the dinner table in the evening. As he took his seat the two footmen glanced quickly at each other, and the butler at the sideboard furtively thrust out his underlip. Not a man or woman in the household but had learned the signal denoting the moment when no service would please, no word or movement be unobjectionable. Lady Anstruthers' face unconsciously assumed its propitiatory expression, and she glanced at her sister more than once when Betty was unaware that she did so.

Until the soup had been removed, Sir Nigel scarcely spoke, merely making curt replies to any casual remark. This was one of his simple and most engaging methods of at once enjoying an ill-humour and making his wife feel that she was in some way to blame for it.

"Mount Dunstan is in a deucedly unpleasant position," he condescended at last. "I should not care to stand in his shoes."

He had not returned to the Court until late in the afternoon, but having heard in the village the rumour of the outbreak of fever, he had made inquiries and gathered detail.

"You are thinking of the outbreak of typhoid among the hop pickers?"

said Lady Anstruthers. "Mrs. Brent thinks it threatens to be very serious."

"An epidemic, without a doubt," he answered. "In a wretched unsanitary place like Dunstan village, the wretches will die like flies."

"What will be done?" inquired Betty.

He gave her one of the unpleasant personal glances and laughed derisively.

"Done? The county authorities, who call themselves 'guardians,' will be frightened to death and will potter about and fuss like old women, and profess to examine and protect and lay restrictions, but everyone will manage to keep at a discreet distance, and the thing will run riot and do its worst. As far as one can see, there seems no reason why the whole place should not be swept away. No doubt Mount Dunstan has wisely taken to his heels already."

"I think that, on the contrary, there would be much doubt of that," Betty said. "He would stay and do what he could."

Sir Nigel shrugged his shoulders.

"Would he? I think you'll find he would not."

"Mrs. Brent tells me," Rosalie broke in somewhat hurriedly, "that the huts for the hoppers are in the worst possible condition. They are so dilapidated that the rain pours into them. There is no proper shelter for the people who are ill, and Lord Mount Dunstan cannot afford to take care of them."

"But he WILL--he WILL," broke forth Betty. Her head lifted itself and she spoke almost as if through her small, shut teeth. A wave of intense belief--high, proud, and obstinate, swept through her. It was a feeling so strong and vibrant that she felt as if Mount Dunstan himself must be reached and upborne by it--as if he himself must hear her.

Rosalie looked at her half-startled, and, for the moment held fascinated by the sudden force rising in her and by the splendid spark of light under her lids. She was reminded of the fierce little Betty of long ago, with her delicate, indomitable small face and the spirit which even at nine years old had somehow seemed so strong and straitly keen of sight that one had known it might always be trusted. Actually, in one way, she had not changed. She saw the truth of things. The next instant, however, inadvertently glancing towards her husband, she caught her breath quickly. Across his heavy-featured face had shot the sudden gleam of a new expression. It was as if he had at the moment recognised something which filled him with a rush of fury he himself was not prepared for. That he did not wish it to be seen she knew by his manner. There was a brief silence in which it passed away. He spoke after it, with disagreeable precision.

"He has had an enormous effect on you--that man," he said to Betty.

He spoke clearly so that she might have the pleasure of being certain that the menservants heard. They were close to the table, handing fruit--professing to be automatons, eyes down, faces expressing nothing, but as quick of hearing as it is said that blind men are. He knew that if he had been in her place and a thing as insultingly significant had been said to him, he should promptly have hurled the nearest object--plate, wineglass, or decanter--in the face of the speaker.

He knew, too, that women cannot hurl projectiles without looking like viragos and fools. The weakly-feminine might burst into tears or into a silly rage and leave the table. There was a distinct breath's space of pause, and Betty, cutting a cluster from a bunch of hothouse grapes presented by the footman at her side, answered as clearly as he had spoken himself.

"He is strong enough to produce an effect on anyone," she said. "I think you feel that yourself. He is a man who will not be beaten in the end. Fortune will give him some good thing."

"He is a fellow who knows well enough on which hand of him good things lie," he said. "He will take all that offers itself."

"Why not?" Betty said impartially.

"There must be no riding or driving in the neighbourhood of the place," he said next. "I will have no risks run." He turned and addressed the butler. "Jennings, tell the servants that those are my orders."

He sat over his wine but a short time that evening, and when he joined his wife and sister-in-law in the drawing-room he went at once to Betty. In fact, he was in the condition when a man cannot keep away from a woman, but must invent some reason for reaching her whether it is fatuous or plausible.

"What I said to Jennings was an order to you as well as to the people below stairs. I know you are particularly fond of riding in the direction of Mount Dunstan. You are in my care so long as you are in my house."

"Orders are not necessary," Betty replied. "The day is past when one rushed to smooth pillows and give the wrong medicine when one's friends were ill. If one is not a properly-trained nurse, it is wiser not to risk being very much in the way."

He spoke over her shoulder, dropping his voice, though Lady Anstruthers sat apart, appearing to read.

"Don't think I am fool enough not to understand. You have yourself under magnificent control, but a woman passionately in love cannot keep a certain look out of her eyes."

He was standing on the hearth. Betty swung herself lightly round, facing him squarely. Her full look was splendid.

"If it is there--let it stay," she said. "I would not keep it out of my eyes if I could, and, you are right, I could not if I would--if it is there. If it is--let it stay."

The daring, throbbing, human truth of her made his brain whirl. To a man young and clean and fit to count as in the lists, to have heard her say the thing of a rival would have been hard enough, but base, degenerate, and of the world behind her day, to hear it while frenzied for her, was intolerable. And it was Mount Dunstan she bore herself so highly for. Whether melodrama is out of date or not there are, occasionally, some fine melodramatic touches in the enmities of to-day.

"You think you will reach him," he persisted. "You think you will help him in some way. You will not let the thing alone."

"Excuse my mentioning that whatsoever I take the liberty of doing will encroach on no right of yours," she said.

But, alone in her room, after she went upstairs, the face reflecting itself in the mirror was pale and its black brows were drawn together.

She sat down at the dressing-table, and, seeing the paled face, drew the

black brows closer, confronting a complicating truth.

"If I were free to take Rosalie and Ughtred home to-morrow," she thought, "I could not bear to go. I should suffer too much."

She was suffering now. The strong longing in her heart was like a physical pain. No word or look of this one man had given her proof that his thoughts turned to her, and yet it was intolerable--intolerable--that in his hour of stress and need they were as wholly apart as if worlds rolled between them. At any dire moment it was mere nature that she should give herself in help and support. If, on the night at sea, when they had first spoken to each other, the ship had gone down, she knew that they two, strangers though they were, would have worked side by side among the frantic people, and have been among the last to take to the boats. How did she know? Only because, he being he, and she being she, it must have been so in accordance with the laws ruling entities. And now he stood facing a calamity almost as terrible--and she with full hands sat still.

She had seen the hop pickers' huts and had recognised their condition. Mere brick sheds in which the pickers slept upon bundles of hay or straw in their best days; in their decay they did not even provide shelter. In fine weather the hop gatherers slept well enough in them, cooking their food in gypsy-fashion in the open. When the rain descended, it must run down walls and drip through the holes in the roofs in streams which would soak clothes and bedding. The worst that Nigel and Mrs. Brent had

implied was true. Illness of any order, under such circumstances, would have small chance of recovery, but malignant typhoid without shelter, without proper nourishment or nursing, had not one chance in a million. And he--this one man--stood alone in the midst of the tragedy--responsible and helpless. He would feel himself responsible as she herself would, if she were in his place. She was conscious that suddenly the event of the afternoon--the interview upon the marshes, had receded until it had become an almost unmeaning incident. What did the degenerate, melodramatic folly matter----!

She had restlessly left her chair before the dressing-table, and was walking to and fro. She paused and stood looking down at the carpet, though she scarcely saw it.

"Nothing matters but one thing--one person," she owned to herself aloud. "I suppose it is always like this. Rosy, Ughtred, even father and mother--everyone seems less near than they were. It is too strong--too strong. It is----" the words dropped slowly from her lips, "the strongest thing--in the world."

She lifted her face and threw out her hands, a lovely young half-sad smile curling the deep corners of her mouth. "Sometimes one feels so disdained," she said--"so disdained with all one's power. Perhaps I am an unwanted thing."

But even in this case there were aids one might make an effort to give.



She went to her writing-table and sat thinking for some time. Afterwards she began to write letters. Three or four were addressed to London--one was to Mr. Penzance.

. . . . .

Mount Dunstan and his vicar were walking through the village to the vicarage. They had been to the hop pickers' huts to see the people who were ill of the fever. Both of them noticed that cottage doors and windows were shut, and that here and there alarmed faces looked out from behind latticed panes.

"They are in a panic of fear," Mount Dunstan said, "and by way of safeguard they shut out every breath of air and stifle indoors. Something must be done."

Catching the eye of a woman who was peering over her short white dimity blind, he beckoned to her authoritatively. She came to the door and hesitated there, curtsying nervously.

Mount Dunstan spoke to her across the hedge.

"You need not come out to me, Mrs. Binner. You may stay where you are," he said. "Are you obeying the orders given by the Guardians?"

"Yes, my lord. Yes, my lord," with more curtsys.

"Your health is very much in your own hands," he added.

"You must keep your cottage and your children cleaner than you have ever kept them before, and you must use the disinfectant I sent you. Keep away from the huts, and open your windows. If you don't open them, I shall come and do it for you. Bad air is infection itself. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my lord. Thank your lordship."

"Go in and open your windows now, and tell your neighbours to do the same. If anyone is ill let me know at once. The vicar and I will do our best for everyone."

By that time curiosity had overcome fear, and other cottage doors had opened. Mount Dunstan passed down the row and said a few words to each woman or man who looked out. Questions were asked anxiously and he answered them. That he was personally unafraid was comfortingly plain, and the mere sight of him was, on the whole, an unexplainable support.

"We heard said your lordship was going away," put in a stout mother with a heavy child on her arm, a slight testiness scarcely concealed by respectful good-manners. She was a matron with a temper, and that a Mount Dunstan should avoid responsibilities seemed highly credible.

"I shall stay where I am," Mount Dunstan answered. "My place is here."

They believed him, Mount Dunstan though he was. It could not be said that they were fond of him, but gradually it had been borne in upon them that his word was to be relied on, though his manner was unalluring and they knew he was too poor to do his duty by them or his estate. As he walked away with the vicar, windows were opened, and in one or two untidy cottages a sudden flourishing of mops and brooms began.

There was dark trouble in Mount Dunstan's face. In the huts they had left two men stiff on their straw, and two women and a child in a state of collapse. Added to these were others stricken helpless. A number of workers in the hop gardens, on realising the danger threatening them, had gathered together bundles and children, and, leaving the harvest behind, had gone on the tramp again. Those who remained were the weaker or less cautious, or were held by some tie to those who were already ill of the fever. The village doctor was an old man who had spent his blameless life in bringing little cottagers into the world, attending their measles and whooping coughs, and their father's and grandfather's rheumatics. He had never faced a village crisis in the course of his seventy-five years, and was aghast and flurried with fright. His methods remained those of his youth, and were marked chiefly by a readiness to prescribe calomel in any emergency. A younger and stronger man was needed, as well as a man of more modern training. But even the most brilliant practitioner of the hour could not have provided shelter and nourishment, and without them his skill would have counted as nothing.

For three weeks there had been no rain, which was a condition of the barometer not likely to last. Already grey clouds were gathering and obscuring the blueness of the sky.

The vicar glanced upwards anxiously.

"When it comes," he said, "there will be a downpour, and a persistent one."

"Yes," Mount Dunstan answered.

He had lain awake thinking throughout the night. How was a man to sleep! It was as Betty Vanderpoel had known it would be. He, who--beggar though he might be--was the lord of the land, was the man to face the strait of these poor workers on the land, as his own. Some action must be taken. What action? As he walked by his friend's side from the huts where the dead men lay it revealed itself that he saw his way.

They were going to the vicarage to consult a medical book, but on the way there they passed a part of the park where, through a break in the timber the huge, white, blind-faced house stood on view. Mount Dunstan laid his hand on Mr. Penzance's shoulder and stopped him,

"Look there!" he said. "THERE are weather-tight rooms enough."

A startled expression showed itself on the vicar's face.

"For what?" he exclaimed

"For a hospital," brusquely "I can give them one thing, at least--shelter."

"It is a very remarkable thing to think of doing," Mr. Penzance said.

"It is not so remarkable as that labourers on my land should die at my gate because I cannot give them decent roofs to cover them. There is a roof that will shield them from the weather. They shall be brought to the Mount."

The vicar was silent a moment, and a flush of sympathy warmed his face.

"You are quite right, Fergus," he said, "entirely right."

"Let us go to your study and plan how it shall be done," Mount Dunstan said.

As they walked towards the vicarage, he went on talking.

"When I lie awake at night, there is one thread which always winds itself through my thoughts whatsoever they are. I don't find that I can disentangle it. It connects itself with Reuben S. Vanderpoel's daughter. You would know that without my telling you. If you had ever struggled

with an insane passion----"

"It is not insane, I repeat," put in Penzance unflinchingly.

"Thank you--whether you are right or wrong," answered Mount Dunstan, striding by his side. "When I am awake, she is as much a part of my existence as my breath itself. When I think things over, I find that I am asking myself if her thoughts would be like mine. She is a creature of action. Last night, as I lay awake, I said to myself, 'She would DO something. What would she do?' She would not be held back by fear of comment or convention. She would look about her for the utilisable, and she would find it somewhere and use it. I began to sum up the village resources and found nothing--until my thoughts led me to my own house. There it stood--empty and useless. If it were hers, and she stood in my place, she would make it useful. So I decided."

"You are quite right," Mr. Penzance said again.

They spent an hour in his library at the vicarage, arranging practical methods for transforming the great ballroom into a sort of hospital ward. It could be done by the removal of pieces of furniture from the many unused bedrooms. There was also the transportation of the patients from the huts to be provided for. But, when all this was planned out, each found himself looking at the other with an unspoken thought in his mind. Mount Dunstan first expressed it.

"As far as I can gather, the safety of typhoid fever patients depends almost entirely on scientific nursing, and the caution with which even liquid nourishment is given. The woman whose husband died this morning told me that he had seemed better in the night, and had asked for something to eat. She gave him a piece of bread and a slice of cold bacon, because he told her he fancied it. I could not explain to her, as she sat sobbing over him, that she had probably killed him. When we have patients in our ward, what shall we feed them on, and who will know how to nurse them? They do not know how to nurse each other, and the women in the village would not run the risk of undertaking to help us."

But, even before he had left the house, the problem was solved for them. The solving of it lay in the note Miss Vanderpoel had written the night before at Stornham.

When it was brought to him Mr. Penzance glanced up from certain calculations he was making upon a sheet of note-paper. The accumulating difficulties made him look worn and tired. He opened the note and read it gravely, and then as gravely, though with a change of expression, handed it to Mount Dunstan.

"Yes, she is a creature of action. She has heard and understood at once, and she has done something. It is immensely practical--it is fine--it--it is lovable."

"Do you mind my keeping it?" Mount Dunstan asked, after he had read it.

"Keep it by all means," the vicar answered. "It is worth keeping."

But it was quite brief. She had heard of the outbreak of fever among the hop pickers, and asked to be allowed to give help to the people who were suffering. They would need prompt aid. She chanced to know something of the requirements of such cases, and had written to London for certain supplies which would be sent to them at once. She had also written for nurses, who would be needed above all else. Might she ask Mr. Penzance to kindly call upon her for any further assistance required.

"Tell her we are deeply grateful," said Mount Dunstan, "and that she has given us greater help than she knows."

"Why not answer her note yourself?" Penzance suggested.

Mount Dunstan shook his head.

"No," he said shortly. "No."