CHAPTER XLIII

HIS CHANCE

Betty walked much alone upon the marshes with Roland at her side. At intervals she heard from Mr. Penzance, but his notes were necessarily brief, and at other times she could only rely upon report for news of what was occurring at Mount Dunstan. Lord Mount Dunstan's almost military supervision of and command over his villagers had certainly saved them from the horrors of an uncontrollable epidemic; his decision and energy had filled the alarmed Guardians with respect and this respect had begun to be shared by many other persons. A man as prompt in action, and as faithful to such responsibilities as many men might have found plausible reasons enough for shirking, inevitably assumed a certain dignity of aspect, when all was said and done. Lord Dunholm was most clear in his expressions of opinion concerning him. Lady Alanby of Dole made a practice of speaking of him in public frequently, always with admiring approval, and in that final manner of hers, to whose authority her neighbours had so long submitted. It began to be accepted as a fact that he was a new development of his race--as her ladyship had put it, "A new order of Mount Dunstan."

The story of his power over the stricken people, and of their passionate affection and admiration for him, was one likely to spread far, and be immensely popular. The drama of certain incidents appealed greatly to the rustic mind, and by cottage firesides he was represented with

rapturous awe, as raising men, women, and children from the dead, by the mere miracle of touch. Mrs. Welden and old Doby revelled in thrilling, almost Biblical, versions of current anecdotes, when Betty paid her visits to them.

"It's like the Scripture, wot he done for that young man as the last breath had gone out of him, an' him lyin' stiffening fast. 'Young man, arise,' he says. 'The Lord Almighty calls. You've got a young wife an' three children to take care of. Take up your bed an' walk.' Not as he wanted him to carry his bed anywheres, but it was a manner of speaking. An' up the young man got. An' a sensible way," said old Mrs. Welden frankly, "for the Lord to look at it--for I must say, miss, if I was struck down for it, though I s'pose it's only my sinful ignorance--that there's times when the Lord seems to think no more of sweepin' away a steady eighteen-shillin' a week, and p'raps seven in family, an' one at the breast, an' another on the way--than if it was nothin'. But likely enough, eighteen shillin' a week an' confinements does seem paltry to the Maker of 'eaven an' earth."

But, to the girl walking over the marshland, the humanness of the things she heard gave to her the sense of nearness--of being almost within sight and sound--which Mount Dunstan himself had felt, when each day was filled with the result of her thought of the needs of the poor souls thrown by fate into his hands. In these days, after listening to old Mrs. Welden's anecdotes, through which she gathered the simpler truth of things, Betty was able to construct for herself a less Scriptural

version of what she had heard. She was glad--glad in his sitting by a bedside and holding a hand which lay in his hot or cold, but always trusting to something which his strong body and strong soul gave without stint. There would be no restraint there. Yes, he was kind--kind--kind --with the kindness a woman loves, and which she, of all women, loved most. Sometimes she would sit upon some mound, and, while her eyes seemed to rest on the yellowing marsh and its birds and pools, they saw other things, and their colour grew deep and dark as the marsh water between the rushes.

The time was pressing when a change in her life must come. She frequently asked herself if what she saw in Nigel Anstruthers' face was the normal thinking of a sane man, which he himself could control. There had been moments when she had seriously doubted it. He was haggard, aging and restless. Sometimes he--always as if by chance--followed her as she went from one room to another, and would seat himself and fix his miserable eyes upon her for so long a time that it seemed he must be unconscious of what he was doing. Then he would appear suddenly to recollect himself and would start up with a muttered exclamation, and stalk out of the room. He spent long hours riding or driving alone about the country or wandering wretchedly through the Park and gardens. Once he went up to town, and, after a few days' absence, came back looking more haggard than before, and wearing a hunted look in his eyes. He had gone to see a physician, and, after having seen him, he had tried to lose himself in a plunge into deep and turbid enough waters; but he found that he had even lost the taste of high flavours, for which he

had once had an epicurean palate. The effort had ended in his being overpowered again by his horrors--the horrors in which he found himself staring at that end of things when no pleasure had spice, no debauchery the sting of life, and men, such as he, stood upon the shore of time shuddering and naked souls, watching the great tide, bearing its treasures, recede forever, and leave them to the cold and hideous dark. During one day of his stay in town he had seen Teresita, who had at first stared half frightened by the change she saw in him, and then had told him truths he could have wrung her neck for putting into words.

"You look an old man," she said, with the foreign accent he had once found deliciously amusing, but which now seemed to add a sting. "And somesing is eating you op. You are mad in lofe with some beautiful one who will not look at you. I haf seen it in mans before. It is she who eats you op--your evil thinkings of her. It serve you right. Your eyes look mad."

He himself, at times, suspected that they did, and cursed himself because he could not keep cool. It was part of his horrors that he knew his internal furies were worse than folly, and yet he could not restrain them. The creeping suspicion that this was only the result of the simple fact that he had never tried to restrain any tendency of his own was maddening. His nervous system was a wreck. He drank a great deal of whisky to keep himself "straight" during the day, and he rose many times during his black waking hours in the night to drink more because he obstinately refused to give up the hope that, if he drank enough, it

would make him sleep. As through the thoughts of Mount Dunstan, who was

a clean and healthy human being, there ran one thread which would not disentangle itself, so there ran through his unwholesome thinking a thread which burned like fire. His secret ravings would not have been good to hear. His passion was more than half hatred, and a desire for vengeance, for the chance to re-assert his own power, to prove himself master, to get the better in one way or another of this arrogant young outsider and her high-handed pride. The condition of his mind was so far from normal that he failed to see that the things he said to himself, the plans he laid, were grotesque in their folly. The old cruel dominance of the man over the woman thing, which had seemed the mere natural working of the law among men of his race in centuries past, was awake in him, amid the limitations of modern days.

"My God," he said to himself more than once, "I would like to have had her in my hands a few hundred years ago. Women were kept in their places, then."

He was even frenzied enough to think over what he would have done, if such a thing had been--of her utter helplessness against that which raged in him--of the grey thickness of the walls where he might have held and wrought his will upon her--insult, torment, death. His alcohol-excited brain ran riot--but, when it did its foolish worst, he was baffled by one thing.

"Damn her!" he found himself crying out. "If I had hung her up and cut her into strips she would have died staring at me with her big eyes--without uttering a sound."

There was a long reach between his imaginings and the time he lived in. America had not been discovered in those decent days, and now a man could not beat even his own wife, or spend her money, without being meddled with by fools. He was thinking of a New York young woman of the nineteenth century who could actually do as she hanged pleased, and who pleased to be damned high and mighty. For that reason in itself it was incumbent upon a man to get even with her in one way or another. High and mightiness was not the hardest thing to reach. It offered a good aim.

His temper when he returned to Stornham was of the order which in past years had set Rosalie and her child shuddering and had sent the servants about the house with pale or sullen faces. Betty's presence had the odd effect of restraining him, and he even told her so with sneering resentment.

"There would be the devil to pay if you were not here," he said. "You keep me in order, by Jove! I can't work up steam properly when you watch me."

He himself knew that it was likely that some change would take place. She would not stay at Stornham and she would not leave his wife and

child alone with him again. It would be like her to hold her tongue until she was ready with her infernal plans and could spring them on him. Her letters to her father had probably prepared him for such action as such a man would be likely to take. He could guess what it would be. They were free and easy enough in America in their dealings with the marriage tie. Their idea would doubtless be a divorce with custody of the child. He wondered a little that they had remained quiet so long. There had been American shrewdness in her coming boldly to Stornham to look over the ground herself and actually set the place in order. It did not present itself to his mind that what she had done had been no part of a scheme, but the mere result of her temperament and training. He told himself that it had been planned beforehand and carried out in hard-headed commercial American fashion as a matter of business. The thing which most enraged him was the implied cool, practical realisation of the fact that he, as inheritor of an entailed estate, was but owner in charge, and not young enough to be regarded as an insurmountable obstacle to their plans. He could not undo the greater part of what had been done, and they were calculating, he argued, that his would not be likely to be a long life, and if--if anything happened--Stornham would be Ughtred's and the whole vulgar lot of them would come over and take possession and swagger about the place as if they had been born on it. As to divorce or separation--if they took that line, he would at least give them a good run for their money. They would wish they had let sleeping dogs lie before the thing was over. The right kind of lawyer could bully Rosalie into saying anything he chose on the witness-stand. There was not much limit to the evidence a man could bring if he was

experienced enough to be circumstantial, and knew whom he was dealing with. The very fact that the little fool could be made to appear to have been so sly and sanctimonious would stir the gall of any jury of men. His own condoning the matter for the sake of his sensitive boy, deformed by his mother's unrestrained and violent hysteria before his birth, would go a long way. Let them get their divorce, they would have paid for it, the whole lot of them, the beautiful Miss Vanderpoel and all. Such a story as the newspapers would revel in would not be a recommendation to Englishmen of unsmirched reputation. Then his exultation would suddenly drop as his mental excitement produced its effect of inevitable physical fatigue. Even if he made them pay for getting their own way, what would happen to himself afterwards? No morbid vanity of self-bolstering could make the outlook anything but unpromising. If he had not had such diabolical luck in his few investments he could have lived his own life. As it was, old Vanderpoel would possibly condescend to make him some insufficient allowance because Rosalie would wish that it might be done, and he would be expected to drag out to the end the kind of life a man pensioned by his wife's relatives inevitably does. If he attempted to live in the country he should blow out his brains. When his depression was at its worst, he saw himself aging and shabby, rambling about from one cheap Continental town to another, blackballed by good clubs, cold-shouldered even by the Teresitas, cut off from society by his limited means and the stories his wife's friends would spread. He ground his teeth when he thought of Betty. Her splendid vitality had done something to life for him--had given it savour. When he had come upon her in the avenue his blood had

stirred, even though it had been maliciously, and there had been spice in his very resentment of her presence. And she would go away. He would not be likely to see her again if his wife broke with him; she would be swept out of his days. It was hideous to think of, and his rage would overpower him and his nerves go to pieces again.

"What are you going to do?" he broke forth suddenly one evening, when he found himself temporarily alone with her. "You are going to do something. I see it in your eyes."

He had been for some time watching her from behind his newspaper, while she, with an unread book upon her lap, had, in fact, been thinking deeply and putting to herself serious questions.

Her answer made him stir rather uncomfortably.

"I am going to write to my father to ask him to come to England."

So this was what she had been preparing to spring upon him. He laughed insolently.

"To ask him to come here?"

"With your permission."

"With mine? Does an American father-in-law wait for permission?"

"Is there any practical reason why you should prefer that he should NOT come?"

He left his seat and walked over to her.

"Yes. Your sending for him is a declaration of war."

"It need not be so. Why should it?"

"In this case I happen to be aware that it is. The choice is your own, I suppose," with ready bravado, "that you and he are prepared to face the consequences. But is Rosalie, and is your mother?"

"My father is a business man and will know what can be done. He will know what is worth doing," she answered, without noticing his question. "But," she added the words slowly, "I have been making up my mind--before I write to him--to say something to you--to ask you a question."

He made a mock sentimental gesture.

"To ask me to spare my wife, to 'remember that she is the mother of my child'?"

She passed over that also.

"To ask you if there is no possible way in which all this unhappiness can be ended decently."

"The only decent way of ending it would be that there should be no further interference. Let Rosalie supply the decency by showing me the consideration due from a wife to her husband. The place has been put in order. It was not for my benefit, and I have no money to keep it up. Let Rosalie be provided with means to do it."

As he spoke the words he realised that he had opened a way for embarrassing comment. He expected her to remind him that Rosalie had not come to him without money. But she said nothing about the matter. She never said the things he expected to hear.

"You do not want Rosalie for your wife," she went on "but you could treat her courteously without loving her. You could allow her the privileges other men's wives are allowed. You need not separate her from her family. You could allow her father and mother to come to her and leave her free to go to them sometimes. Will you not agree to that? Will you not let her live peaceably in her own simple way? She is very gentle and humble and would ask nothing more."

"She is a fool!" he exclaimed furiously. "A fool! She will stay where she is and do as I tell her."

"You knew what she was when you married her. She was simple and girlish and pretended to be nothing she was not. You chose to marry her and take her from the people who loved her. You broke her spirit and her heart. You would have killed her if I had not come in time to prevent it."

"I will kill her yet if you leave her," his folly made him say.

"You are talking like a feudal lord holding the power of life and death in his hands," she said. "Power like that is ancient history. You can hurt no one who has friends--without being punished."

It was the old story. She filled him with the desire to shake or disturb her at any cost, and he did his utmost. If she was proposing to make terms with him, he would show her whether he would accept them or not. He let her hear all he had said to himself in his worst moments--all that he had argued concerning what she and her people would do, and what his own actions would be--all his intention to make them pay the uttermost farthing in humiliation if he could not frustrate them. His methods would be definite enough. He had not watched his wife and Ffolliott for weeks to no end. He had known what he was dealing with. He had put other people upon the track and they would testify for him. He poured forth unspeakable statements and intimations, going, as usual, further than he had known he should go when he began. Under the spur of excitement his imagination served him well. At last he paused.

"Well," he put it to her, "what have you to say?"

"I?" with the remote intent curiosity growing in her eyes. "I have nothing to say. I am leaving you to say things."

"You will, of course, try to deny----" he insisted.

"No, I shall not. Why should I?"

"You may assume your air of magnificence, but I am dealing with uncomfortable factors." He stopped in spite of himself, and then burst forth in a new order of rage. "You are trying some confounded experiment on me. What is it?"

She rose from her chair to go out of the room, and stood a moment holding her book half open in her hand.

"Yes. I suppose it might be called an experiment," was her answer. "Perhaps it was a mistake. I wanted to make quite sure of something."

"Of what?"

"I did not want to leave anything undone. I did not want to believe that any man could exist who had not one touch of decent feeling to redeem him. It did not seem human."

White dints showed themselves about his nostrils.

"Well, you have found one," he cried. "You have a lashing tongue, by God, when you choose to let it go. But I could teach you a good many things, my girl. And before I have done you will have learned most of them."

But though he threw himself into a chair and laughed aloud as she left him, he knew that his arrogance and bullying were proving poor weapons, though they had done him good service all his life. And he knew, too, that it was mere simple truth that, as a result of the intellectual, ethical vagaries he scathingly derided--she had actually been giving him a sort of chance to retrieve himself, and that if he had been another sort of man he might have taken it.