

CHAPTER XLIV

A FOOTSTEP

It was cold enough for fires in halls and bedrooms, and Lady Anstruthers often sat over hers and watched the glowing bed of coals with a fixed thoughtfulness of look. She was so sitting when her sister went to her room to talk to her, and she looked up questioningly when the door closed and Betty came towards her.

"You have come to tell me something," she said.

A slight shade of anxiousness showed itself in her eyes, and Betty sat down by her and took her hand. She had come because what she knew was that Rosalie must be prepared for any step taken, and the time had arrived when she must not be allowed to remain in ignorance even of things it would be unpleasant to put into words.

"Yes," she answered. "I want to talk to you about something I have decided to do. I think I must write to father and ask him to come to us."

Rosalie turned white, but though her lips parted as if she were going to speak, she said nothing.

"Do not be frightened," Betty said. "I believe it is the only thing to

do."

"I know! I know!"

Betty went on, holding the hand a little closer. "When I came here you were too weak physically to be able to face even the thought of a struggle. I saw that. I was afraid it must come in the end, but I knew that at that time you could not bear it. It would have killed you and might have killed mother, if I had not waited; and until you were stronger, I knew I must wait and reason coolly about you--about everything."

"I used to guess--sometimes," said Lady Anstruthers.

"I can tell you about it now. You are not as you were then," Betty said.

"I did not know Nigel at first, and I felt I ought to see more of him. I wanted to make sure that my child hatred of him did not make me unfair. I even tried to hope that when he came back and found the place in order and things going well, he might recognise the wisdom of behaving with decent kindness to you. If he had done that I knew father would have provided for you both, though he would not have left him the opportunity to do again what he did before. No business man would allow such a thing as that. But as time has gone by I have seen I was mistaken in hoping for a respectable compromise. Even if he were given a free hand he would not change. And now----" She hesitated, feeling it difficult to choose such words as would not be too unpleasant. How was she to tell Rosy of

the ugly, morbid situation which made ordinary passiveness impossible.

"Now there is a reason----" she began again.

To her surprise and relief it was Rosalie who ended for her. She spoke with the painful courage which strong affection gives a weak thing. Her face was pale no longer, but slightly reddened, and she lifted the hand which held hers and kissed it.

"You shall not say it," she interrupted her. "I will. There is a reason now why you cannot stay here--why you shall not stay here. That was why I begged you to go. You must go, even if I stay behind alone."

Never had the beautiful Miss Vanderpoel's eyes worn so fully their look of being bluebells under water. That this timid creature should so stand at bay to defend her was more moving than anything else could have been.

"Thank you, Rosy--thank you," she answered. "But you shall not be left alone. You must go, too. There is no other way. Difficulties will be made for us, but we must face them. Father will see the situation from a practical man's standpoint. Men know the things other men cannot do. Women don't. Generally they know nothing about the law and can be bullied into feeling that it is dangerous and compromising to inquire into it. Nigel has always seen that it was easy to manage women. A strong business man who has more exact legal information than he has himself will be a new factor to deal with. And he cannot make objectionable love to him. It is because he knows these things that he

says that my sending for father will be a declaration of war."

"Did he say that?" a little breathlessly.

"Yes, and I told him that it need not be so. But he would not listen."

"And you are sure father will come?"

"I am sure. In a week or two he will be here."

Lady Anstruthers' lips shook, her eyes lifted themselves to Betty's in a touchingly distressed appeal. Had her momentary courage fled beyond recall? If so, that would be the worst coming to the worst, indeed. Yet it was not ordinary fear which expressed itself in her face, but a deeper piteousness, a sudden hopeless pain, baffling because it seemed a new emotion, or perhaps the upheaval of an old one long and carefully hidden.

"You will be brave?" Betty appealed to her. "You will not give way, Rosy?"

"Yes, I must be brave--I am not ill now. I must not fail you--I won't, Betty, but----"

She slipped upon the floor and dropped her face upon the girl's knee,

sobbing.

Betty bent over her, putting her arms round the heaving shoulders, and pleading with her to speak. Was there something more to be told, something she did not know?

"Yes, yes. Oh, I ought to have told you long ago--but I have always been afraid and ashamed. It has made everything so much worse. I was afraid you would not understand and would think me wicked--wicked."

It was Betty who now lost a shade of colour. But she held the slim little body closer and kissed her sister's cheek.

"What have you been afraid and ashamed to tell me? Do not be ashamed any more. You must not hide anything, no matter what it is, Rosy. I shall understand."

"I know I must not hide anything, now that all is over and father is coming. It is--it is about Mr. Ffolliott."

"Mr. Ffolliott?" repeated Betty quite softly.

Lady Anstruthers' face, lifted with desperate effort, was like a weeping child's. So much so in its tear-wet simpleness and utter lack of any effort at concealment, that after one quick look at it Betty's hastened

pulses ceased to beat at double-quick time.

"Tell me, dear," she almost whispered.

"Mr. Ffolliott himself does not know--and I could not help it. He was kind to me when I was dying of unkindness. You don't know what it was like to be drowning in loneliness and misery, and to see one good hand stretched out to help you. Before he went away--oh, Betty, I know it was awful because I was married!--I began to care for him very much, and I have cared for him ever since. I cannot stop myself caring, even though I am terrified."

Betty kissed her again with a passion of tender pity. Poor little, simple Rosy, too! The tide had crept around her also, and had swept her off her feet, tossing her upon its surf like a wisp of seaweed and bearing her each day farther from firm shore.

"Do not be terrified," she said. "You need only be afraid if--if you had told him."

"He will never know--never. Once in the middle of the night," there was anguish in the delicate face, pure anguish, "a strange loud cry wakened me, and it was I myself who had cried out--because in my sleep it had come home to me that the years would go on and on, and at last some day he would die and go out of the world--and I should die and go out of the world. And he would never know--even KNOW."

Betty's clasp of her loosened and she sat very still, looking straight before her into some unseen place.

"Yes," she said involuntarily. "Yes, I know--I know--I know."

Lady Anstruthers fell back a little to gaze at her.

"YOU know? YOU know?" she breathed. "Betty?"

But Betty at first did not speak. Her lovely eyes dwelt on the far-away place.

"Betty," whispered Rosy, "do you know what you have said?"

The lovely eyes turned slowly towards her, and the soft corners of Betty's mouth deepened in a curious unsteadiness.

"Yes. I did not intend to say it. But it is true. I know--I know--I know. Do not ask me how."

Rosalie flung her arms round her waist and for a moment hid her face.

"YOU! YOU!" she murmured, but stopped herself almost as she uttered the exclamation. "I will not ask you," she said when she spoke again. "But now I shall not be so ashamed. You are a beauty and wonderful, and I am

not; but if you KNOW, that makes us almost the same. You will understand why I broke down. It was because I could not bear to think of what will happen. I shall be saved and taken home, but Nigel will wreak revenge on HIM. And I shall be the shame that is put upon him--only because he was kind--KIND. When father comes it will all begin." She wrung her hands, becoming almost hysterical.

"Hush," said Betty. "Hush! A man like that CANNOT be hurt, even by a man like Nigel. There is a way out--there IS. Oh, Rosy, we must BELIEVE it."

She soothed and caressed her and led her on to relieving her long locked-up misery by speech. It was easy to see the ways in which her feeling had made her life harder to bear. She was as inexperienced as a girl, and had accused herself cruelly. When Nigel had tormented her with evil, carefully chosen taunts, she had felt half guilty and had coloured scarlet or turned pale, afraid to meet his sneeringly smiling face. She had tried to forget the kind voice, the kindly, understanding eyes, and had blamed herself as a criminal because she could not.

"I had nothing else to remember--but unhappiness--and it seemed as if I could not help but remember HIM," she said as simply as the Rosy who had left New York at nineteen might have said it. "I was afraid to trust myself to speak his name. When Nigel made insulting speeches I could not answer him, and he used to say that women who had adventures should train their faces not to betray them every time they were looked at.

"Oh!" broke from Betty's lips, and she stood up on the hearth and threw out her hands. "I wish that for one day I might be a man--and your brother instead of your sister!"

"Why?"

Betty smiled strangely--a smile which was not amused--which was perhaps not a smile at all. Her voice as she answered was at once low and tense.

"Because, then I should know what to do. When a male creature cannot be reached through manhood or decency or shame, there is one way in which he can be punished. A man--a real man--should take him by his throat and lash him with a whip--while others look on--lash him until he howls aloud like a dog."

She had not expected to say it, but she had said it. Lady Anstruthers looked at her fascinated, and then she covered her face with her hands, huddling herself in a heap as she knelt on the rug, looking singularly small and frail.

"Betty," she said presently, in a new, awful little voice, "I--I will tell you something. I never thought I should dare to tell anyone alive. I have shuddered at it myself. There have been days--awful, helpless days, when I was sure there was no hope for me in all the world--when deep down in my soul I understood what women felt when they MURDERED people--crept to them in their wicked sleep and STRUCK them again--and

again--and again. Like that!" She sat up suddenly, as if she did not know what she was doing, and uncovering her little ghastly face struck downward three fierce times at nothingness--but as if it were not nothingness, and as if she held something in her hand.

There was horror in it--Betty sprang at the hand and caught it.

"No! no!" she cried out. "Poor little Rosy! Darling little Rosy! No! no! no!"

That instant Lady Anstruthers looked up at her shocked and awake. She was Rosy again, and clung to her, holding to her dress, piteous and panting.

"No! no!" she said. "When it came to me in the night--it was always in the night--I used to get out of bed and pray that it might never, never come again, and that I might be forgiven--just forgiven. It was too horrible that I should even UNDERSTAND it so well." A woeful, wry little smile twisted her mouth. "I was not brave enough to have done it. I could never have DONE it, Betty; but the thought was there--it was there! I used to think it had made a black mark on my soul."

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The letter took long to write. It led a consecutive story up to the point where it culminated in a situation which presented itself as no

longer to be dealt with by means at hand. Parts of the story previous letters had related, though some of them it had not seemed absolutely necessary to relate in detail. Now they must be made clear, and Betty made them so.

"Because you trusted me you made me trust myself," was one of the things she wrote. "For some time I felt that it was best to fight for my own hand without troubling you. I hoped perhaps I might be able to lead things to a decorous sort of issue. I saw that secretly Rosy hoped and prayed that it might be possible. She gave up expecting happiness before she was twenty, and mere decent peace would have seemed heaven to her, if she could have been allowed sometimes to see those she loved and longed for. Now that I must give up my hope--which was perhaps a rather foolish one--and now that I cannot remain at Stornham, she would have no defence at all if she were left alone. Her condition would be more hopeless than before, because Nigel would never forget that we had tried to rescue her and had failed. If I were a man, or if I were very much older, I need not be actually driven away, but as it is I think that you must come and take the matter into your own hands."

She had remained in her sister's room until long after midnight, and by the time the American letter was completed and sealed, a pale touch of dawning light was showing itself. She rose, and going to the window drew the blind up and looked out. The looking out made her open the window, and when she had done so she stood feeling the almost unearthly freshness of the morning about her. The mystery of the first faint light

was almost unearthly, too. Trees and shrubs were beginning to take form and outline themselves against the still pallor of the dawn. Before long the waking of the birds would begin--a brief chirping note here and there breaking the silence and warning the world with faint insistence that it had begun to live again and must bestir itself. She had got out of her bed sometimes on a summer morning to watch the beauty of it, to see the flowers gradually reveal their colour to the eye, to hear the warmly nesting things begin their joyous day. There were fewer bird sounds now, and the garden beds were autumnal. But how beautiful it all was! How wonderful life in such a place might be if flowers and birds and sweep of sward, and mass of stately, broad-branched trees, were parts of the home one loved and which surely would in its own way love one in return. But soon all this phase of life would be over. Rosalie, once safe at home, would look back, remembering the place with a shudder. As Ughtred grew older the passing of years would dim miserable child memories, and when his inheritance fell to him he might return to see it with happier eyes. She began to picture to herself Rosy's voyage in the ship which would carry her across the Atlantic to her mother and the scenes connected in her mind only with a girl's happiness. Whatsoever happened before it took place, the voyage would be made in the end. And Rosalie would be like a creature in a dream--a heavenly, unbelievable dream. Betty could imagine how she would look wrapped up and sitting in her steamer chair, gazing out with rapturous eyes upon the racing waves.

"She will be happy," she thought. "But I shall not. No, I shall not."

She drew in the morning air and unconsciously turned towards the place where, across the rising and falling lands and behind the trees, she knew the great white house stood far away, with watchers' lights showing dimly behind the line of ballroom windows.

"I do not know how such a thing could be! I do not know how such a thing could be!" she said. "It COULD not." And she lifted a high head, not even asking herself what remote sense in her being so obstinately defied and threw down the glove to Fate.

Sounds gain a curious distinctness and meaning in the hour of the break of the dawn; in such an hour they seem even more significant than sounds heard in the dead of night. When she had gone to the window she had fancied that she heard something in the corridor outside her door, but when she had listened there had been only silence. Now there was sound again--that of a softly moved slippered foot. She went to the room's centre and waited. Yes, certainly something had stirred in the passage. She went to the door itself. The dragging step had hesitated--stopped. Could it be Rosalie who had come to her for something. For one second her impulse was to open the door herself; the next, she had changed her mind with a sense of shock. Someone had actually touched the handle and very delicately turned it. It was not pleasant to stand looking at it and see it turn. She heard a low, evidently unintentionally uttered exclamation, and she turned away, and with no attempt at softening the sound of her footsteps walked across the room, hot with passionate

disgust. As well as if she had flung the door open, she knew who stood outside. It was Nigel Anstruthers, haggard and unseemly, with burned-out, sleepless eyes and bitten lip.

Bad and mad as she had at last seen the situation to be, it was uglier and more desperate than she could well know.