CHAPTER XLV

THE PASSING BELL

The following morning Sir Nigel did not appear at the breakfast table. He breakfasted in his own room, and it became known throughout the household that he had suddenly decided to go away, and his man was packing for the journey. What the journey or the reason for its being taken happened to be were things not explained to anyone but Lady Anstruthers, at the door of whose dressing room he appeared without warning, just as she was leaving it.

Rosalie started when she found herself confronting him. His eyes looked hot and hollow with feverish sleeplessness.

"You look ill," she exclaimed involuntarily. "You look as if you had not slept."

"Thank you. You always encourage a man. I am not in the habit of sleeping much," he answered. "I am going away for my health. It is as well you should know. I am going to look up old Broadmorlands. I want to know exactly where he is, in case it becomes necessary for me to see him. I also require some trifling data connected with Ffolliott. If your father is coming, it will be as well to be able to lay my hands on things. You can explain to Betty. Good-morning." He waited for no reply, but wheeled about and left her.

Betty herself wore a changed face when she came down. A cloud had passed over her blooming, as clouds pass over a morning sky and dim it. Rosalie asked herself if she had not noticed something like this before. She began to think she had. Yes, she was sure that at intervals there had been moments when she had glanced at the brilliant face with an uneasy and yet half-unrealising sense of looking at a glowing light temporarily waning. The feeling had been unrealisable, because it was not to be explained. Betty was never ill, she was never low-spirited, she was never out of humour or afraid of things--that was why it was so wonderful to live with her. But--yes, it was true--there had been days when the strong, fine light of her had waned. Lady Anstruthers' comprehension of it arose now from her memory of the look she had seen the night before in the eyes which suddenly had gazed straight before her, as into an unknown place.

"Yes, I know--I know--I know!" And the tone in the girl's voice had been one Rosy had not heard before.

Slight wonder--if you KNEW--at any outward change which showed itself, though in your own most desperate despite. It would be so even with Betty, who, in her sister's eyes, was unlike any other creature. But perhaps it would be better to make no comment. To make comment would be almost like asking the question she had been forbidden to ask.

While the servants were in the room during breakfast they talked of common things, resorting even to the weather and the news of the village. Afterwards they passed into the morning room together, and Betty put her arm around Rosalie and kissed her.

"Nigel has suddenly gone away, I hear," she said. "Do you know where he has gone?"

"He came to my dressing-room to tell me." Betty felt the whole slim body stiffen itself with a determination to seem calm. "He said he was going to find out where the old Duke of Broadmorlands was staying at present."

"There is some forethought in that," was Betty's answer. "He is not on such terms with the Duke that he can expect to be received as a casual visitor. It will require apt contrivance to arrange an interview. I wonder if he will be able to accomplish it?"

"Yes, he will," said Lady Anstruthers. "I think he can always contrive things like that." She hesitated a moment, and then added: "He said also that he wished to find out certain things about Mr. Ffolliott--'trifling data,' he called it--that he might be able to lay his hands on things if father came. He told me to explain to you."

"That was intended for a taunt--but it's a warning," Betty said, thinking the thing over. "We are rather like ladies left alone to defend a besieged castle. He wished us to feel that." She tightened her

enclosing arm. "But we stand together--together. We shall not fail each other. We can face siege until father comes."

"You wrote to him last night?"

"A long letter, which I wish him to receive before he sails. He might decide to act upon it before leaving New York, to advise with some legal authority he knows and trusts, to prepare our mother in some way--to do some wise thing we cannot foresee the value of. He has known the outline of the story, but not exact details--particularly recent ones. I have held back nothing it was necessary he should know. I am going out to post the letter myself. I shall send a cable asking him to prepare to come to us after he has reflected on what I have written."

Rosalie was very quiet, but when, having left the room to prepare to go to the village, Betty came back to say a last word, her sister came to her and laid her hand on her arm.

"I have been so weak and trodden upon for years that it would not be natural for you to quite trust me," she said. "But I won't fail you, Betty--I won't."

The winter was drawing in, the last autumn days were short and often grey and dreary; the wind had swept the leaves from the trees and scattered them over park lands and lanes, where they lay a mellow-hued, rustling carpet, shifting with each chill breeze that blew. The berried

briony garlands clung to the bared hedges, and here and there flared scarlet, still holding their red defiantly until hard frosts should come to shrivel and blacken them. The rare hours of sunshine were amber hours instead of golden.

As she passed through the park gate Betty was thinking of the first morning on which she had walked down the village street between the irregular rows of red-tiled cottages with the ragged little enclosing gardens. Then the air and sunshine had been of the just awakening spring, now the sky was brightly cold, and through the small-paned windows she caught glimpses of fireglow. A bent old man walking very slowly, leaning upon two sticks, had a red-brown woollen muffler wrapped round his neck. Seeing her, he stopped and shuffled the two sticks into one hand that he might leave the other free to touch his wrinkled forehead stiffly, his face stretching into a slow smile as she stopped to speak to him.

"Good-morning, Marlow," he said. "How is the rheumatism to-day?"

He was a deaf old man, whose conversation was carried on principally by guesswork, and it was easy for him to gather that when her ladyship's handsome young sister had given him greeting she had not forgotten to inquire respecting the "rheumatics," which formed the greater part of existence.

"Mornin', miss--mornin'," he answered in the high, cracked voice

of rural ancientry. "Winter be nigh, an' they damp days be full of rheumatiz. 'T'int easy to get about on my old legs, but I be main thankful for they warm things you sent, miss. This 'ere," fumbling at his red-brown muffler proudly, "'tis a comfort on windy days, so 'tis, and warmth be a good thing to a man when he be goin' down hill in years."

"All of you who are not able to earn your own fires shall be warm this winter," her ladyship's handsome sister said, speaking closer to his ear. "You shall all be warm. Don't be afraid of the cold days coming."

He shuffled his sticks and touched his forehead again, looking up at her admiringly and chuckling.

"'T'will be a new tale for Stornham village," he cackled. "'T'will be a new tale. Thank ye, miss. Thank ye."

As she nodded smilingly and passed on, she heard him cackling still under his breath as he hobbled on his slow way, comforted and elate. How almost shamefully easy it was; a few loads of coal and faggots here and there, a few blankets and warm garments whose cost counted for so little when one's hands were full, could change a gruesome village winter into a season during which labour-stiffened and broken old things, closing their cottage doors, could draw their chairs round the hearth and hover luxuriously over the red glow, which in its comforting fashion of seeming to have understanding of the dull dreams in old eyes, was more

to be loved than any human friend.

But she had not needed her passing speech with Marlow to stimulate realisation of how much she had learned to care for the mere living among these people, to whom she seemed to have begun to belong, and whose comfortably lighting faces when they met her showed that they knew her to be one who might be turned to in any hour of trouble or dismay. The centuries which had trained them to depend upon their "betters" had taught the slowest of them to judge with keen sight those who were to be trusted, not alone as power and wealth holders, but as creatures humanly upright and merciful with their kind.

"Workin' folk allus knows gentry," old Doby had once shrilled to her. "Gentry's gentry, an' us knows 'em wheresoever they be. Better'n they know theirselves. So us do!"

Yes, they knew. And though they accepted many things as being merely their natural rights, they gave an unsentimental affection and appreciation in return. The patriarchal note in the life was lovable to her. Each creature she passed was a sort of friend who seemed almost of her own blood. It had come to that. This particular existence was more satisfying to her than any other, more heart-filling and warmly complete.

"Though I am only an impostor," she thought; "I was born in Fifth Avenue; yet since I have known this I shall be quite happy in no other

place than an English village, with a Norman church tower looking down upon it and rows of little gardens with spears of white and blue lupins and Canterbury bells standing guard before cottage doors."

And Rosalie--on the evening of that first strange day when she had come upon her piteous figure among the heather under the trees near the lake--Rosalie had held her arm with a hot little hand and had said feverishly:

"If I could hear the roar of Broadway again! Do the stages rattle as they used to, Betty? I can't help hoping that they do."

She carried her letter to the post and stopped to talk a few minutes with the postmaster, who transacted his official business in a small shop where sides of bacon and hams hung suspended from the ceiling, while groceries, flannels, dress prints, and glass bottles of sweet stuff filled the shelves. "Mr. Tewson's" was the central point of Stornham in a commercial sense. The establishment had also certain social qualifications.

Mr. Tewson knew the secrets of all hearts within the village radius, also the secrets of all constitutions. He knew by some occult means who had been "taken bad," or who had "taken a turn," and was aware at once when anyone was "sinkin' fast." With such differences of opinion as occasionally arose between the vicar and his churchwardens he was immediately familiar. The history of the fever among the hop pickers at

Dunstan village he had been able to relate in detail from the moment of its outbreak. It was he who had first dramatically revealed the truth of the action Miss Vanderpoel had taken in the matter, which revelation had aroused such enthusiasm as had filled The Clock Inn to overflowing and given an impetus to the sale of beer. Tread, it was said, had even made a speech which he had ended with vague but excellent intentions by proposing the joint healths of her ladyship's sister and the "President of America." Mr. Tewson was always glad to see Miss Vanderpoel cross his threshold. This was not alone because she represented the custom of the Court, which since her arrival had meant large regular orders and large bills promptly paid, but that she brought with her an exotic atmosphere of interest and excitement.

He had mentioned to friends that somehow a talk with her made him feel "set up for the day." Betty was not at all sure that he did not prepare and hoard up choice remarks or bits of information as openings to conversation.

This morning he had thrilling news for her and began with it at once.

"Dr. Fenwick at Stornham is very low, miss," he said. "He's very low, you'll be sorry to hear. The worry about the fever upset him terrible and his bronchitis took him bad. He's an old man, you know."

Miss Vanderpoel was very sorry to hear it. It was quite in the natural order of things that she should ask other questions about Dunstan

village and the Mount, and she asked several.

The fever was dying out and pale convalescents were sometimes seen in the village or strolling about the park. His lordship was taking care of the people and doing his best for them until they should be strong enough to return to their homes.

"But he's very strict about making it plain that it's you, miss, they have to thank for what he does."

"That is not quite just," said Miss Vanderpoel. "He and Mr. Penzance fought on the field. I only supplied some of the ammunition."

"The county doesn't think of him as it did even a year ago, miss," said Tewson rather smugly. "He was very ill thought of then among the gentry. It's wonderful the change that's come about. If he should fall ill there'll be a deal of sympathy."

"I hope there is no question of his falling ill," said Miss Vanderpoel.

Mr. Tewson lowered his voice confidentially. This was really his most valuable item of news.

"Well, miss," he admitted, "I have heard that he's been looking very bad for a good bit, and it was told me quite private, because the doctors and the vicar don't want the people to be upset by hearing it--that for

a week he's not been well enough to make his rounds."

"Oh!" The exclamation was a faint one, but it was an exclamation. "I hope that means nothing really serious," Miss Vanderpoel added. "Everyone will hope so."

"Yes, miss," said Mr. Tewson, deftly twisting the string round the package he was tying up for her. "A sad reward it would be if he lost his life after doing all he has done. A sad reward! But there'd be a good deal of sympathy."

The small package contained trifles of sewing and knitting materials she was going to take to Mrs. Welden, and she held out her hand for it. She knew she did not smile quite naturally as she said her good-morning to Tewson. She went out into the pale amber sunshine and stood a few moments, glad to find herself bathed in it again. She suddenly needed air and light. "A sad reward!" Sometimes people were not rewarded. Brave men were shot dead on the battlefield when they were doing brave things; brave physicians and nurses died of the plagues they faithfully wrestled with. Here were dread and pain confronting her--Betty Vanderpoel--and while almost everyone else seemed to have faced them, she was wholly unused to their appalling clutch. What a life hers had been--that in looking back over it she should realise that she had never been touched by anything like this before! There came back to her the look of almost awed wonder in G. Selden's honest eyes when he said: "What it must be to be you--just YOU!" He had been thinking only of the millions and of

the freedom from all everyday anxieties the millions gave. She smiled faintly as the thought crossed her brain. The millions! The rolling up of them year by year, because millions were breeders! The newspaper stories of them--the wonder at and belief in their power! It was all going on just as before, and yet here stood a Vanderpoel in an English village street, of no more worth as far as power to aid herself went than Joe Buttle's girl with the thick waist and round red cheeks. Jenny Buttle would have believed that her ladyship's rich American sister could do anything she chose, open any door, command any presence, sweep aside any obstacle with a wave of her hand. But of the two, Jenny Buttle's path would have laid straighter before her. If she had had "a young man" who had fallen ill she would have been free if his mother had cherished no objection to their "walking out"--to spend all her spare hours in his cottage, making gruel and poultices, crying until her nose and eyes were red, and pouring forth her hopes and fears to any neighbour who came in or out or hung over the dividing garden hedge. If the patient died, the deeper her mourning and the louder her sobs at his funeral the more respectable and deserving of sympathy and admiration would Jenny Buttle have been counted. Her ladyship's rich American sister had no "young man"; she had not at any time been asked to "walk out." Even in the dark days of the fever, each of which had carried thought and action of hers to the scene of trouble, there had reigned unbroken silence, except for the vicar's notes of warm and appreciative gratitude.

"You are very obstinate, Fergus," Mr. Penzance had said.

And Mount Dunstan had shaken his head fiercely and answered:

"Don't speak to me about it. Only obstinacy will save me from behaving like--other blackguards."

Mr. Penzance, carefully polishing his eyeglasses as he watched him, was not sparing in his comment.

"That is pure folly," he said, "pure bull-necked, stubborn folly, charging with its head down. Before it has done with you it will have made you suffer quite enough."

"Be sure of that," Mount Dunstan had said, setting his teeth, as he sat in his chair clasping his hands behind his head and glowering into space.

Mr. Penzance quietly, speculatively, looked him over, and reflected aloud--or, so it sounded.

"It is a big-boned and big-muscled characteristic, but there are things which are stronger. Some one minute will arrive--just one minute--which will be stronger. One of those moments when the mysteries of the universe are at work."

"Don't speak to me like that, I tell you!" Mount Dunstan broke out

passionately. And he sprang up and marched out of the room like an angry man.

Miss Vanderpoel did not go to Mrs. Welden's cottage at once, but walked past its door down the lane, where there were no more cottages, but only hedges and fields on either side of her. "Not well enough to make his rounds" might mean much or little. It might mean a temporary breakdown from overfatigue or a sickening for deadly illness. She looked at a group of cropping sheep in a field and at a flock of rooks which had just alighted near it with cawing and flapping of wings. She kept her eyes on them merely to steady herself. The thoughts she had brought out with her had grown heavier and were horribly difficult to control. One must not allow one's self to believe the worst will come--one must not allow it.

She always held this rule before herself, and now she was not holding it steadily. There was nothing to do. She could write a mere note of inquiry to Mr. Penzance, but that was all. She could only walk up and down the lanes and think--whether he lay dying or not. She could do nothing, even if a day came when she knew that a pit had been dug in the clay and he had been lowered into it with creaking ropes, and the clods shovelled back upon him where he lay still--never having told her that he was glad that her being had turned to him and her heart cried aloud his name. She recalled with curious distinctness the effect of the steady toll of the church bell--the "passing bell."

She could hear it as she had heard it the first time it fell upon her ear, and she had inquired what it meant. Why did they call it the "passing bell"? All had passed before it began to toll--all had passed. If it tolled at Dunstan and the pit was dug in the churchyard before her father came, would he see, the moment they met, that something had befallen her--that the Betty he had known was changed--gone? Yes, he would see. Affection such as his always saw. Then he would sit alone with her in some quiet room and talk to her, and she would tell him the strange thing that had happened. He would understand--perhaps better than she.

She stopped abruptly in her walk and stood still. The hand holding her package was quite cold. This was what one must not allow one's self. But how the thoughts had raced through her brain! She turned and hastened her steps towards Mrs. Welden's cottage.

In Mrs. Welden's tiny back yard there stood a "coal lodge" suited to the size of the domicile and already stacked with a full winter's supply of coal. Therefore the well-polished and cleanly little grate in the living-room was bright with fire.

Old Doby, who had tottered round the corner to pay his fellow gossip a visit, was sitting by it, and old Mrs. Welden, clean as to cap and apron and small purple shoulder shawl, had evidently been allaying his natural anxiety as to the conduct of foreign sovereigns by reading in a loud voice the "print" under the pictures in an illustrated paper.

This occupation had, however, been interrupted a few moments before Miss Vanderpoel's arrival. Mrs. Bester, the neighbour in the next cottage, had stepped in with her youngest on her hip and was talking breathlessly. She paused to drop her curtsy as Betty entered, and old Doby stood up and made his salute with a trembling hand,

"She'll know," he said. "Gentry knows the ins an' outs of gentry fust. She'll know the rights."

"What has happened?"

Mrs. Bester unexpectedly burst into tears. There was an element in the female villagers' temperament which Betty had found was frequently unexpected in its breaking forth.

"He's down, miss," she said. "He's down with it crool bad. There'll be no savin' of him--none."

Betty laid her package of sewing cotton and knitting wool quietly on the blue and white checked tablecloth.

"Who--is he?" she asked.

"His lordship--and him just saved all Dunstan parish from death--to go like this!"

In Stornham village and in all others of the neighbourhood the feminine attitude towards Mount Dunstan had been one of strongly emotional admiration. The thwarted female longing for romance--the desire for drama and a hero had been fed by him. A fine, big young man, one that had been "spoke ill of" and regarded as an outcast, had suddenly turned the tables on fortune and made himself the central figure of the county, the talk of gentry in their grand houses, of cottage women on their doorsteps, and labourers stopping to speak to each other by the roadside. Magic stories had been told of him, beflowered with dramatic detail. No incident could have been related to his credit which would not have been believed and improved upon. Shut up in his village working among his people and unseen by outsiders, he had become a popular idol. Any scrap of news of him--any rumour, true or untrue, was seized upon and excitedly spread abroad. Therefore Mrs. Bester wept as she talked, and, if the truth must be told, enjoyed the situation. She was the first to tell the story to her ladyship's sister herself, as well as to Mrs. Welden and old Doby.

"It's Tom as brought it in," she said. "He's my brother, miss, an' he's one of the ringers. He heard it from Jem Wesgate, an' he heard it at Toomy's farm. They've been keepin' it hid at the Mount because the people that's ill hangs on his lordship so that the doctors daren't let them know the truth. They've been told he had to go to London an' may come back any day. What Tom was sayin', miss, was that we'd all know when it was over, for we'd hear the church bell toll here same as it'd

toll at Dunstan, because they ringers have talked it over an' they're goin' to talk it over to-day with the other parishes--Yangford an' Meltham an' Dunholm an' them. Tom says Stornham ringers met just now at The Clock an' said that for a man that's stood by labouring folk like he has, toll they will, an' so ought the other parishes, same as if he was royalty, for he's made himself nearer. They'll toll the minute they hear it, miss. Lord help us!" with a fresh outburst of crying. "It don't seem like it's fair as it should be. When we hear the bell toll, miss----"

"Don't!" said her ladyship's handsome sister suddenly. "Please don't say it again."

She sat down by the table, and resting her elbows on the blue and white checked cloth, covered her face with her hands. She did not speak at all. In this tiny room, with these two old souls who loved her, she need not explain. She sat quite still, and Mrs. Welden after looking at her for a few seconds was prompted by some sublimely simple intuition, and gently sidled Mrs. Bester and her youngest into the little kitchen, where the copper was.

"Her helpin' him like she did, makes it come near," she whispered. "Dessay it seems as if he was a'most like a relation."

Old Doby sat and looked at his goddess. In his slowly moving old brain stirred far-off memories like long-dead things striving to come to life.

He did not know what they were, but they wakened his dim eyes to a new seeing of the slim young shape leaning a little forward, the soft cloud of hair, the fair beauty of the cheek. He had not seen anything like it in his youth, but--it was Youth itself, and so was that which the ringers were so soon to toll for; and for some remote and unformed reason, to his scores of years they were pitiful and should be cheered. He bent forward himself and put out his ancient, veined and knotted, gnarled and trembling hand, to timorously touch the arm of her he worshipped and adored.

"God bless ye!" he said, his high, cracked voice even more shrill and thin than usual. "God bless ye!" And as she let her hands slip down, and, turning, gently looked at him, he nodded to her speakingly, because out of the dimness of his being, some part of Nature's working had strangely answered and understood.