

## CHAPTER XLVI

### LISTENING

On her way back to the Court her eyes saw only the white road before her feet as she walked. She did not lift them until she found herself passing the lych-gate at the entrance to the churchyard. Then suddenly she looked up at the square grey stone tower where the bells hung, and from which they called the village to church, or chimed for weddings--or gave slowly forth to the silent air one heavy, regular stroke after another. She looked and shuddered, and spoke aloud with a curious, passionate imploring, like a child's.

"Oh, don't toll! Don't toll! You must not! You cannot!" Terror had sprung upon her, and her heart was being torn in two in her breast. That was surely what it seemed like--this agonising ache of fear. Now from hour to hour she would be waiting and listening to each sound borne on the air. Her thought would be a possession she could not escape. When she spoke or was spoken to, she would be listening--when she was silent every echo would hold terror, when she slept--if sleep should come to her--her hearing would be awake, and she would be listening--listening even then. It was not Betty Vanderpoel who was walking along the white road, but another creature--a girl whose brain was full of abnormal thought, and whose whole being made passionate outcry against the thing which was being slowly forced upon her. If the bell tolled--suddenly, the whole world would be swept clean of life--empty and clean. If the

bell tolled.

Before the entrance of the Court she saw, as she approached it, the vicarage pony carriage, standing as it had stood on the day she had returned from her walk on the marshes. She felt it quite natural that it should be there. Mrs. Brent always seized upon any fragment of news, and having seized on something now, she had not been able to resist the excitement of bringing it to Lady Anstruthers and her sister.

She was in the drawing-room with Rosalie, and was full of her subject and the emotion suitable to the occasion. She had even attained a certain modified dampness of handkerchief. Rosalie's handkerchief, however, was not damp. She had not even attempted to use it, but sat still, her eyes brimming with tears, which, when she saw Betty, brimmed over and slipped helplessly down her cheeks.

"Betty!" she exclaimed, and got up and went towards her, "I believe you have heard."

"In the village, I heard something--yes," Betty answered, and after giving greeting to Mrs. Brent, she led her sister back to her chair, and sat near her.

This--the thought leaped upon her--was the kind of situation she must be prepared to be equal to. In the presence of these who knew nothing, she must bear herself as if there was nothing to be known. No one but

herself had the slightest knowledge of what the past months had brought to her--no one in the world. If the bell tolled, no one in the world but her father ever would know. She had no excuse for emotion. None had been given to her. The kind of thing it was proper that she should say and do now, in the presence of Mrs. Brent, it would be proper and decent that she should say and do in all other cases. She must comport herself as Betty Vanderpoel would if she were moved only by ordinary human sympathy and regret.

"We must remember that we have only excited rumour to depend upon," she said. "Lord Mount Dunstan has kept his village under almost military law. He has put it into quarantine. No one is allowed to leave it, so there can be no direct source of information. One cannot be sure of the entire truth of what one hears. Often it is exaggerated cottage talk. The whole neighbourhood is wrought up to a fever heat of excited sympathy. And villagers like the drama of things."

Mrs. Brent looked at her admiringly, it being her fixed habit to admire Miss Vanderpoel, and all such as Providence had set above her.

"Oh, how wise you are, Miss Vanderpoel!" she exclaimed, even devoutly. "It is so nice of you to be calm and logical when everybody else is so upset. You are quite right about villagers enjoying the dramatic side of troubles. They always do. And perhaps things are not so bad as they say. I ought not to have let myself believe the worst. But I quite broke down

under the ringers--I was so touched."

"The ringers?" faltered Lady Anstruthers

"The leader came to the vicar to tell him they wanted permission to toll--if they heard tolling at Dunstan. Weaver's family lives within hearing of Dunstan church bells, and one of his boys is to run across the fields and bring the news to Stornham. And it was most touching, Miss Vanderpoel. They feel, in their rustic way, that Lord Mount Dunstan has not been treated fairly in the past. And now he seems to them a hero and a martyr--or like a great soldier who has died fighting."

"Who MAY die fighting," broke from Miss Vanderpoel sharply.

"Who--who may----" Mrs. Brent corrected herself, "though Heaven grant he will not. But it was the ringers who made me feel as if all really was over. Thank you, Miss Vanderpoel, thank you for being so practical and--and cool."

"It WAS touching," said Lady Anstruthers, her eyes brimming over again.

"And what the villagers feel is true. It goes to one's heart," in a little outburst. "People have been unkind to him! And he has been lonely in that great empty place--he has been lonely. And if he is dying to-day, he is lonely even as he dies--even as he dies."

Betty drew a deep breath. For one moment there seemed to rise before

her vision of a huge room, whose stately size made its bareness a more desolate thing. And Mr. Penzance bent low over the bed. She tore her thought away from it.

"No! No!" she cried out in low, passionate protest. "There will be love and yearning all about him everywhere. The villagers who are waiting--the poor things he has worked for--the very ringers themselves, are all pouring forth the same thoughts. He will feel even ours--ours too! His soul cannot be lonely."

A few minutes earlier, Mrs. Brent had been saying to herself inwardly: "She has not much heart after all, you know." Now she looked at her in amazement.

The blue bells were under water in truth--drenched and drowned. And yet as the girl stood up before her, she looked taller--more the magnificent Miss Vanderpoel than ever--though she expressed a new meaning.

"There is one thing the villagers can do for him," she said. "One thing we can all do. The bell has not tolled yet. There is a service for those who are--in peril. If the vicar will call the people to the church, we can all kneel down there--and ask to be heard. The vicar will do that I am sure--and the people will join him with all their hearts."

Mrs. Brent was overwhelmed.

"Dear, dear, Miss Vanderpoel!" she exclaimed. "THAT is touching, indeed it is! And so right and so proper. I will drive back to the village at once. The vicar's distress is as great as mine. You think of everything. The service for the sick and dying. How right--how right!"

With a sense of an increase of value in herself, the vicar, and the vicarage, she hastened back to the pony carriage, but in the hall she seized Betty's hand emotionally.

"I cannot tell you how much I am touched by this," she murmured. "I did not know you were--were a religious girl, my dear."

Betty answered with grave politeness.

"In times of great pain and terror," she said, "I think almost everybody is religious--a little. If that is the right word."

There was no ringing of the ordinary call to service. In less than an hour's time people began to come out of their cottages and wend their way towards the church. No one had put on his or her Sunday clothes. The women had hastily rolled down their sleeves, thrown off their aprons, and donned everyday bonnets and shawls. The men were in their corduroys, as they had come in from the fields, and the children wore their pinafores. As if by magic, the news had flown from house to house, and each one who had heard it had left his or her work without a moment's hesitation. They said but little as they made their way to the church.

Betty, walking with her sister, was struck by the fact that there were more of them than formed the usual Sunday morning congregation. They were doing no perfunctory duty. The men's faces were heavily moved, most of the women wiped their eyes at intervals, and the children looked awed. There was a suggestion of hurried movement in the step of each--as if no time must be lost--as if they must begin their appeal at once.

Betty saw old Doby tottering along stiffly, with his granddaughter and Mrs. Welden on either side of him. Marlow, on his two sticks, was to be seen moving slowly, but steadily.

Within the ancient stone walls, stiff old knees bent themselves with care, and faces were covered devoutly by work-hardened hands. As she passed through the churchyard Betty knew that eyes followed her affectionately, and that the touching of foreheads and dropping of curtsies expressed a special sympathy. In each mind she was connected with the man they came to pray for--with the work he had done--with the danger he was in. It was vaguely felt that if his life ended, a bereavement would have fallen upon her. This the girl knew.

The vicar lifted his bowed head and began his service. Every man, woman and child before him responded aloud and with a curious fervour--not in decorous fear of seeming to thrust themselves before the throne, making too much of their petitions, in the presence of the gentry. Here and there sobs were to be heard. Lady Anstruthers followed the service timorously and with tears. But Betty, kneeling at her side, by the round table in the centre of the great square Stornham pew, which was like a

room, bowed her head upon her folded arms, and prayed her own intense, insistent prayer.

"God in Heaven!" was her inward cry. "God of all the worlds! Do not let him die. 'If ye ask anything in my name that I will do.' Christ said it. In the name of Jesus of Nazareth--do not let him die! All the worlds are yours--all the power--listen to us--listen to us. Lord, I believe--help thou my unbelief. If this terror robs me of faith, and I pray madly--forgive, forgive me. Do not count it against me as sin. You made him. He has suffered and been alone. It is not time--it is not time yet for him to go. He has known no joy and no bright thing. Do not let him go out of the warm world like a blind man. Do not let him die. Perhaps this is not prayer, but raging. Forgive--forgive! All power is gone from me. God of the worlds, and the great winds, and the myriad stars--do not let him die!"

She knew her thoughts were wild, but their torrent bore her with them into a strange, great silence. She did not hear the vicar's words, or the responses of the people. She was not within the grey stone walls. She had been drawn away as into the darkness and stillness of the night, and no soul but her own seemed near. Through the stillness and the dark her praying seemed to call and echo, clamouring again and again. It must reach Something--it must be heard, because she cried so loud, though to the human beings about her she seemed kneeling in silence. She went on and on, repeating her words, changing them, ending and beginning again, pouring forth a flood of appeal. She thought later that the flood must



have been at its highest tide when, singularly, it was stemmed. Without warning, a wave of awe passed over her which strangely silenced her--and left her bowed and kneeling, but crying out no more. The darkness had become still, even as it had not been still before. Suddenly she cowered as she knelt and held her breath. Something had drawn a little near. No thoughts--no words--no cries were needed as the great stillness grew and spread, and folded her being within it. She waited--only waited. She did not know how long a time passed before she felt herself drawn back from the silent and shadowy places--awakening, as it were, to the sounds in the church.

"Our Father," she began to say, as simply as a child. "Our Father who art in Heaven--hallowed be thy name." There was a stirring among the congregation, and sounds of feet, as the people began to move down the aisle in reverent slowness. She caught again the occasional sound of a subdued sob. Rosalie gently touched her, and she rose, following her out of the big pew and passing down the aisle after the villagers.

Outside the entrance the people waited as if they wanted to see her again. Foreheads were touched as before, and eyes followed her. She was to the general mind the centre of the drama, and "the A'mighty" would do well to hear her. She had been doing his work for him "same as his lordship." They did not expect her to smile at such a time, when she returned their greetings, and she did not, but they said afterwards, in their cottages, that "trouble or not she was a wonder for looks, that she was--Miss Vanderpoel."

Rosalie slipped a hand through her arm, and they walked home together, very close to each other. Now and then there was a questioning in Rosy's look. But neither of them spoke once.

On an oak table in the hall a letter from Mr. Penzance was lying. It was brief, hurried, and anxious. The rumour that Mount Dunstan had been ailing was true, and that they had felt they must conceal the matter from the villagers was true also. For some baffling reason the fever had not absolutely declared itself, but the young doctors were beset by grave forebodings. In such cases the most serious symptoms might suddenly develop. One never knew. Mr. Penzance was evidently torn by fears which he desperately strove to suppress. But Betty could see the anguish on his fine old face, and between the lines she read dread and warning not put into words. She believed that, fearing the worst, he felt he must prepare her mind.

"He has lived under a great strain for months," he ended. "It began long before the outbreak of the fever. I am not strong under my sense of the cruelty of things--and I have never loved him as I love him to-day."

Betty took the letter to her room, and read it two or three times. Because she had asked intelligent questions of the medical authority she had consulted on her visit to London, she knew something of the fever and its habits. Even her unclerical knowledge was such as it was not well to reflect upon. She refolded the letter and laid it aside.

"I must not think. I must do something. It may prevent my listening," she said aloud to the silence of her room.

She cast her eyes about her as if in search. Upon her desk lay a notebook. She took it up and opened it. It contained lists of plants, of flower seeds, of bulbs, and shrubs. Each list was headed with an explanatory note.

"Yes, this will do," she said. "I will go and talk to Kedgers."

Kedgers and every man under him had been at the service, but they had returned to their respective duties. Kedgers, giving directions to some under gardeners who were clearing flower beds and preparing them for their winter rest, turned to meet her as she approached. To Kedgers the sight of her coming towards him on a garden path was a joyful thing. He had done wonders, it is true, but if she had not stood by his side with inspiration as well as confidence, he knew that things might have "come out different."

"You was born a gardener, miss--born one," he had said months ago.

It was the time when flower beds must be planned for the coming year. Her notebook was filled with memoranda of the things they must talk about.

It was good, normal, healthy work to do. The scent of the rich, damp, upturned mould was a good thing to inhale. They walked from one end to another, stood before clumps of shrubs, and studied bits of wall. Here a mass of blue might grow, here low things of white and pale yellow. A quickly-climbing rose would hang sheets of bloom over this dead tree. This sheltered wall would hold warmth for a Marechal Niel.

"You must take care of it all--even if I am not here next year," Miss Vanderpoel said.

Kedgers' absorbed face changed.

"Not here, miss," he exclaimed. "You not here! Things wouldn't grow, miss." He checked himself, his weather-toughened skin reddening because he was afraid he had perhaps taken a liberty. And then moving his hat uneasily on his head, he took another. "But it's true enough," looking down on the gravel walk, "we--we couldn't expect to keep you."

She did not look as if she had noticed the liberty, but she did not look quite like herself, Kedgers thought. If she had been another young lady, and but for his established feeling that she was somehow immune from all ills, he would have thought she had a headache, or was low in her mind.

She spent an hour or two with him, and together they planned for the changing seasons of the year to come. How she could keep her mind on a thing, and what a head she had for planning, and what an eye for colour!

But yes--there was something a bit wrong somehow. Now and then she would

stop and stand still for a moment, and suddenly it struck Kedgers that she looked as if she were listening.

"Did you think you heard something, miss?" he asked her once when she paused and wore this look.

"No," she answered, "no." And drew him on quickly--almost as if she did not want him to hear what she had seemed listening for.

When she left him and went back to the house, all the loveliness of spring, summer and autumn had been thought out and provided for. Kedgers

stood on the path and looked after her until she passed through the terrace door. He chewed his lip uneasily. Then he remembered something and felt a bit relieved. It was the service he remembered.

"Ah! it's that that's upset her--and it's natural, seeing how she's helped him and Dunstan village. It's only natural." He chewed his lip again, and nodded his head in odd reflection. "Ay! Ay!" he summed her up. "She's a great lady that--she's a great lady--same as if she'd been born in a civilised land."

During the rest of the day the look of question in Rosalie's eyes changed in its nature. When her sister was near her she found herself glancing at her with a new feeling. It was a growing feeling, which

gradually became--anxiousness. Betty presented to her the aspect of one withdrawn into some remote space. She was not living this day as her days were usually lived. She did not sit still or stroll about the gardens quietly. The consecutiveness of her action seemed broken. She did one thing after another, as if she must fill each moment. This was not her Betty. Lady Anstruthers watched and thought until, in the end, a new pained fear began to creep slowly into her mind, and make her feel as if she were slightly trembling though her hands did not shake. She did not dare to allow herself to think the thing she knew she was on the brink of thinking. She thrust it away from her, and tried not to think at all. Her Betty--her splendid Betty, whom nothing could hurt--who could not be touched by any awful thing--her dear Betty!

In the afternoon she saw her write notes steadily for an hour, then she went out into the stables and visited the horses, talked to the coachman and to her own groom. She was very kind to a village boy who had been recently taken on as an additional assistant in the stable, and who was rather frightened and shy. She knew his mother, who had a large family, and she had, indeed, given the boy his place that he might be trained under the great Mr. Buckham, who was coachman and head of the stables. She said encouraging things which quite cheered him, and she spoke privately to Mr. Buckham about him. Then she walked in the park a little, but not for long. When she came back Rosalie was waiting for her.

"I want to take a long drive," she said. "I feel restless. Will you

come with me, Betty?" Yes, she would go with her, so Buckham brought the landau with its pair of big horses, and they rolled down the avenue, and into the smooth, white high road. He took them far--past the great marshes, between miles of bared hedges, past farms and scattered cottages. Sometimes he turned into lanes, where the hedges were closer to each other, and where, here and there, they caught sight of new points of view between trees. Betty was glad to feel Rosy's slim body near her side, and she was conscious that it gradually seemed to draw closer and closer. Then Rosy's hand slipped into hers and held it softly on her lap.

When they drove together in this way they were usually both of them rather silent and quiet, but now Rosalie spoke of many things--of Ughtred, of Nigel, of the Dunholms, of New York, and their father and mother.

"I want to talk because I'm nervous, I think," she said half apologetically. "I do not want to sit still and think too much--of father's coming. You don't mind my talking, do you, Betty?"

"No," Betty answered. "It is good for you and for me." And she met the pressure of Rosy's hand halfway.

But Rosy was talking, not because she did not want to sit still and think, but because she did not want Betty to do so. And all the time she was trying to thrust away the thought growing in her mind.

They spent the evening together in the library, and Betty read aloud. She read a long time--until quite late. She wished to tire herself as well as to force herself to stop listening.

When they said good-night to each other Rosy clung to her as desperately as she had clung on the night after her arrival. She kissed her again and again, and then hung her head and excused herself.

"Forgive me for being--nervous. I'm ashamed of myself," she said.  
"Perhaps in time I shall get over being a coward."

But she said nothing of the fact that she was not a coward for herself, but through a slowly formulating and struggled--against fear, which chilled her very heart, and which she could best cover by a pretence of being a poltroon.

She could not sleep when she went to bed. The night seemed crowded with strange, terrified thoughts. They were all of Betty, though sometimes she thought of her father's coming, of her mother in New York, and of Betty's steady working throughout the day. Sometimes she cried, twisting her hands together, and sometimes she dropped into a feverish sleep, and dreamed that she was watching Betty's face, yet was afraid to look at it.

She awakened suddenly from one of these dreams, and sat upright in bed



to find the dawn breaking. She rose and threw on a dressing-gown, and went to her sister's room because she could not bear to stay away.

The door was not locked, and she pushed it open gently. One of the windows had its blind drawn up, and looked like a patch of dull grey. Betty was standing upright near it. She was in her night-gown, and a long black plait of hair hung over one shoulder heavily. She looked all black and white in strong contrast. The grey light set her forth as a tall ghost.

Lady Anstruthers slid forward, feeling a tightness in her chest.

"The dawn wakened me too," she said.

"I have been waiting to see it come," answered Betty. "It is going to be a dull, dreary day."