CHAPTER XLVII

"I HAVE NO WORD OR LOOK TO REMEMBER"

It was a dull and dreary day, as Betty had foreseen it would be. Heavy rain clouds hung and threatened, and the atmosphere was damp and chill. It was one of those days of the English autumn which speak only of the end of things, bereaving one of the power to remember next year's spring and summer, which, after all, must surely come. Sky is grey, trees are grey, dead leaves lie damp beneath the feet, sunlight and birds seem forgotten things. All that has been sad and to be regretted or feared hangs heavy in the air and sways all thought. In the passing of these hours there is no hope anywhere. Betty appeared at breakfast in short dress and close hat. She wore thick little boots, as if for walking.

"I am going to make visits in the village," she said. "I want a basket of good things to take with me. Stourton's children need feeding after their measles. They looked very thin when I saw them playing in the road yesterday."

"Yes, dear," Rosalie answered. "Mrs. Noakes shall prepare the basket. Good chicken broth, and jelly, and nourishing things. Jennings," to the butler, "you know the kind of basket Miss Vanderpoel wants. Speak to Mrs. Noakes, please."

"Yes, my lady," Jennings knew the kind of basket and so did Mrs. Noakes.

Below stairs a strong sympathy with Miss Vanderpoel's movements had developed. No one resented the preparation of baskets. Somehow they were always managed, even if asked for at untimely hours.

Betty was sitting silent, looking out into the greyness of the autumn-smitten park.

"Are--are you listening for anything, Betty?" Lady Anstruthers asked rather falteringly. "You have a sort of listening look in your eyes."

Betty came back to the room, as it were.

"Have I," she said. "Yes, I think I was listening for--something."

And Rosalie did not ask her what she listened for. She was afraid she knew.

It was not only the Stourtons Betty visited this morning. She passed from one cottage to another--to see old women, and old men, as well as young ones, who for one reason or another needed help and encouragement. By one bedside she read aloud; by another she sat and told cheerful stories; she listened to talk in little kitchens, and in one house welcomed a newborn thing. As she walked steadily over grey road and down grey lanes damp mist rose and hung about her. And she did not walk alone. Fear walked with her, and anguish, a grey ghost by her side. Once she found herself standing quite still on a side path, covering her face

with her hands. She filled every moment of the morning, and walked until she was tired. Before she went home she called at the post office, and Mr. Tewson greeted her with a solemn face. He did not wait to be questioned.

"There's been no news to-day, miss, so far," he said. "And that seems as if they might be so given up to hard work at a dreadful time that there's been no chance for anything to get out. When people's hanging over a man's bed at the end, it's as if everything stopped but that--that's stopping for all time."

After luncheon the rain began to fall softly, slowly, and with a suggestion of endlessness. It was a sort of mist itself, and became a damp shadow among the bare branches of trees which soon began to drip.

"You have been walking about all morning, and you are tired, dear," Lady Anstruthers said to her. "Won't you go to your room and rest, Betty?"

Yes, she would go to her room, she said. Some new books had arrived from London this morning, and she would look over them. She talked a little about her visits before she went, and when, as she talked, Ughtred came over to her and stood close to her side holding her hand and stroking it, she smiled at him sweetly--the smile he adored. He stroked the hand and softly patted it, watching her wistfully. Suddenly he lifted it to his lips, and kissed it again and again with a sort of passion.

"I love you so much, Aunt Betty," he cried. "We both love you so much. Something makes me love you to-day more than ever I did before. It almost makes me cry. I love you so."

She stooped swiftly and drew him into her arms and kissed him close and hard. He held his head back a little and looked into the blue under her lashes.

"I love your eyes," he said. "Anyone would love your eyes, Aunt Betty. But what is the matter with them? You are not crying at all, but--oh! what is the matter?"

"No, I am not crying at all," she said, and smiled--almost laughed.

But after she had kissed him again she took her books and went upstairs.

She did not lie down, and she did not read when she was alone in her room. She drew a long chair before the window and watched the slow falling of the rain. There is nothing like it--that slow weeping of the rain on an English autumn day. Soft and light though it was, the park began to look sodden. The bare trees held out their branches like imploring arms, the brown garden beds were neat and bare. The same rain was drip-dripping at Mount Dunstan--upon the desolate great house--upon the village--upon the mounds and ancient stone tombs in the churchyard, sinking into the earth--sinking deep, sucked in by the clay beneath--the cold damp clay. She shook herself shudderingly. Why should the thought

come to her--the cold damp clay? She would not listen to it, she would think of New York, of its roaring streets and crash of sound, of the rush of fierce life there--of her father and mother. She tried to force herself to call up pictures of Broadway, swarming with crowds of black things, which, seen from the windows of its monstrous buildings, seemed like swarms of ants, burst out of ant-hills, out of a thousand ant-hills. She tried to remember shop windows, the things in them, the throngs going by, and the throngs passing in and out of great, swinging glass doors. She dragged up before her a vision of Rosalie, driving with her mother and herself, looking about her at the new buildings and changed streets, flushed and made radiant by the accelerated pace and excitement of her beloved New York. But, oh, the slow, penetrating rainfall, and--the cold damp clay!

She rose, making an involuntary sound which was half a moan. The long mirror set between two windows showed her momentarily an awful young figure, throwing up its arms. Was that Betty Vanderpoel--that?

"What does one do," she said, "when the world comes to an end? What does one do?"

All her days she had done things--there had always been something to do. Now there was nothing. She went suddenly to her bell and rang for her maid. The woman answered the summons at once.

"Send word to the stable that I want Childe Harold. I do not want Mason.

I shall ride alone."

"Yes, miss," Ambleston answered, without any exterior sign of emotion. She was too well-trained a person to express any shade of her internal amazement. After she had transmitted the order to the proper manager she returned and changed her mistress's costume.

She had contemplated her task, and was standing behind Miss Vanderpoel's chair, putting the last touch to her veil, when she became conscious of a slight stiffening of the neck which held so well the handsome head, then the head slowly turned towards the window giving upon the front park. Miss Vanderpoel was listening to something, listening so intently that Ambleston felt that, for a few moments, she did not seem to breathe. The maid's hands fell from the veil, and she began to listen also. She had been at the service the day before. Miss Vanderpoel rose from her chair slowly--very slowly, and took a step forward. Then she stood still and listened again.

"Open that window, if you please," she commanded--"as if a stone image was speaking"--Ambleston said later. The window was thrown open, and for a few seconds they both stood still again. When Miss Vanderpoel spoke, it was as if she had forgotten where she was, or as if she were in a dream.

"It is the ringers," she said. "They are tolling the passing bell."

The serving woman was soft of heart, and had her feminine emotions. There had been much talk of this thing in the servant's hall. She turned upon Betty, and forgot all rules and training.

"Oh, miss!" she cried. "He's gone--he's gone! That good man--out of this hard world. Oh, miss, excuse me--do!" And as she burst into wild tears, she ran out of the room.

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Rosalie had been sitting in the morning room. She also had striven to occupy herself with work. She had written to her mother, she had read, she had embroidered, and then read again. What was Betty doing--what was she thinking now? She laid her book down in her lap, and covering her face with her hands, breathed a desperate little prayer. That life should be pain and emptiness to herself, seemed somehow natural since she had married Nigel--but pain and emptiness for Betty--No! No! No! Not for Betty! Piteous sorrow poured upon her like a flood. She did not know how the time passed. She sat, huddled together in her chair, with hidden face. She could not bear to look at the rain and ghost mist out of doors. Oh, if her mother were only here, and she might speak to her! And as her loving tears broke forth afresh, she heard the door open.

"If you please, my lady--I beg your pardon, my lady," as she started and uncovered her face.

"What is it, Jennings?"

The figure at the door was that of the serious, elderly butler, and he wore a respectfully grave air.

"As your ladyship is sitting in this room, we thought it likely you would not hear, the windows being closed, and we felt sure, my lady, that you would wish to know----"

Lady Anstruthers' hands shook as they clung to the arms of her chair.

"To know----" she faltered. "Hear what?"

"The passing bell is tolling, my lady. It has just begun. It is for Lord Mount Dunstan. There's not a dry eye downstairs, your ladyship, not one."

He opened the windows, and she stood up. Jennings quietly left the room. The slow, heavy knell struck ponderously on the damp air, and she stood and shivered.

A moment or two later she turned, because it seemed as if she must.

Betty, in her riding habit, was standing motionless against the door, her wonderful eyes still as death, gazing at her, gazing in an awful, simple silence.

Oh, what was the use of being afraid to speak at such a time as this? In one moment Rosy was kneeling at her feet, clinging about her knees, kissing her hands, the very cloth of her habit, and sobbing aloud.

"Oh, my darling--my love--my own Betty! I don't know--and I won't ask--but speak to me--speak just a word--my dearest dear!"

Betty raised her up and drew her within the room, closing the door behind them.

"Kind little Rosy," she said. "I came to speak--because we two love each other. You need not ask, I will tell you. That bell is tolling for the man who taught me--to KNOW. He never spoke to me of love. I have not one word or look to remember. And now---- Oh, listen--listen! I have been listening since the morning of yesterday." It was an awful thing--her white face, with all the flame of life swept out of it.

"Don't listen--darling--darling!" Rosy cried out in anguish. "Shut your ears--shut your ears!" And she tried to throw her arms around the high black head, and stifle all sound with her embrace.

"I don't want to shut them," was the answer. "All the unkindness and misery are over for him, I ought to thank God--but I don't. I shall hear--O Rosy, listen!--I shall hear that to the end of my days."

Rosy held her tight, and rocked and sobbed.

"My Betty," she kept saying. "My Betty," and she could say no more. What more was there to say? At last Betty withdrew herself from her arms, and then Rosalie noticed for the first time that she wore the habit.

"Dearest," she whispered, "what are you going to do?"

"I was going to ride, and I am going to do it still. I must do something. I shall ride a long, long way--and ride hard. You won't try to keep me, Rosy. You will understand."

"Yes," biting her lip, and looking at her with large, awed eyes, as she patted her arm with a hand that trembled. "I would not hold you back, Betty, from anything in the world you chose to do."

And with another long, clinging clasp of her, she let her go.

Mason was standing by Childe Harold when she went down the broad steps. He also wore a look of repressed emotion, and stood with bared head bent, his eyes fixed on the gravel of the drive, listening to the heavy strokes of the bell in the church tower, rather as if he were taking part in some solemn ceremony.

He mounted her silently, and after he had given her the bridle, looked up, and spoke in a somewhat husky voice:

"The order was that you did not want me, miss? Was that correct?"

"Yes, I wish to ride alone."

"Yes, miss. Thank you, miss."

Childe Harold was in good spirits. He held up his head, and blew the breath through his delicate, dilated, red nostrils as he set out with his favourite sidling, dancing steps. Mason watched him down the avenue, saw the lodge keeper come out to open the gate, and curtsy as her ladyship's sister passed through it. After that he went slowly back to the stables, and sat in the harness-room a long time, staring at the floor, as the bell struck ponderously on his ear.

The woman who had opened the gate for her Betty saw had red eyes. She knew why.

"A year ago they all thought of him as an outcast. They would have believed any evil they had heard connected with his name. Now, in every cottage, there is weeping--weeping. And he lies deaf and dumb," was her thought.

She did not wish to pass through the village, and turned down a side road, which would lead her to where she could cross the marshes, and come upon lonely places. The more lonely, the better. Every few moments

she caught her breath with a hard short gasp. The slow rain fell upon her, big round, crystal drops hung on the hedgerows, and dripped upon the grass banks below them; the trees, wreathed with mist, were like waiting ghosts as she passed them by; Childe Harold's hoof upon the road, made a hollow, lonely sound.

A thought began to fill her brain, and make insistent pressure upon it. She tried no more to thrust thought away. Those who lay deaf and dumb, those for whom people wept--where were they when the weeping seemed to sound through all the world? How far had they gone? Was it far? Could they hear and could they see? If one plead with them aloud, could they draw near to listen? Did they begin a long, long journey as soon as they had slipped away? The "wonder of the world," she had said, watching life swelling and bursting the seeds in Kedgers' hothouses! But this was a greater wonder still, because of its awesomeness. This man had been, and who dare say he was not--even now? The strength of his great body, the look in his red-brown eyes, the sound of his deep voice, the struggle, the meaning of him, where were they? She heard herself followed by the hollow echo of Childe Harold's hoofs, as she rode past copse and hedge, and wet spreading fields. She was this hour as he had been a month ago. If, with some strange suddenness, this which was Betty Vanderpoel, slipped from its body----She put her hand up to her forehead. It was unthinkable that there would be no more. Where was he now--where was he now?

This was the thought that filled her brain cells to the exclusion of all

others. Over the road, down through by-lanes, out on the marshes. Where was he--where was he--WHERE? Childe Harold's hoofs began to beat it out as a refrain. She heard nothing else. She did not know where she was going and did not ask herself. She went down any road or lane which looked empty of life, she took strange turnings, without caring; she did not know how far she was afield.

Where was he now--this hour--this moment--where was he now? Did he know
the rain, the greyness, the desolation of the world?

Once she stopped her horse on the loneliness of the marsh land, and looked up at the low clouds about her, at the creeping mist, the dank grass. It seemed a place in which a newly-released soul might wander because it did not yet know its way.

"If you should be near, and come to me, you will understand," her clear voice said gravely between the caught breaths, "what I gave you was nothing to you--but you took it with you. Perhaps you know without my telling you. I want you to know. When a man is dead, everything melts away. I loved you. I wish you had loved me."