CHAPTER XLVIII

THE MOMENT

In the unnatural unbearableness of her anguish, she lost sight of objects as she passed them, she lost all memory of what she did. She did not know how long she had been out, or how far she had ridden. When the thought of time or distance vaguely flitted across her mind, it seemed that she had been riding for hours, and might have crossed one county and entered another. She had long left familiar places behind. Riding through and inclosed by the mist, she, herself, might have been a wandering ghost, lost in unknown places. Where was he now--where was he now?

Afterwards she could not tell how or when it was that she found herself becoming conscious of the evidences that her horse had been ridden too long and hard, and that he was worn out with fatigue. She did not know that she had ridden round and round over the marshes, and had passed several times through the same lanes. Childe Harold, the sure of foot, actually stumbled, out of sheer weariness of limb. Perhaps it was this which brought her back to earth, and led her to look around her with eyes which saw material objects with comprehension. She had reached the lonely places, indeed and the evening was drawing on. She was at the edge of the marsh, and the land about her was strange to her and desolate. At the side of a steep lane, overgrown with grass, and seeming a mere cart-path, stood a deserted-looking, black and white, timbered

cottage, which was half a ruin. Close to it was a dripping spinney, its trees forming a darkling background to the tumble-down house, whose thatch was rotting into holes, and its walls sagging forward perilously. The bit of garden about it was neglected and untidy, here and there windows were broken, and stuffed with pieces of ragged garments. Altogether a sinister and repellent place enough.

She looked at it with heavy eyes. (Where was he now--where was he now?--This repeating itself in the far chambers of her brain.) Her sight seemed dimmed, not only by the mist, but by a sinking faintness which possessed her. She did not remember how little food she had eaten during more than twenty-four hours. Her habit was heavy with moisture, and clung to her body; she was conscious of a hot tremor passing over her, and saw that her hands shook as they held the bridle on which they had lost their grip. She had never fainted in her life, and she was not going to faint now--women did not faint in these days--but she must reach the cottage and dismount, to rest under shelter for a short time. No smoke was rising from the chimney, but surely someone was living in the place, and could tell her where she was, and give her at least water for herself and her horse. Poor beast! how wickedly she must have been riding him, in her utter absorption in her thoughts. He was wet, not alone with rain, but with sweat. He snorted out hot, smoking breaths.

She spoke to him, and he moved forward at her command. He was trembling too. Not more than two hundred yards, and she turned him into the lane. But it was wet and slippery, and strewn with stones. His trembling and

her uncertain hold on the bridle combined to produce disaster. He set his foot upon a stone which slid beneath it, he stumbled, and she could not help him to recover, so he fell, and only by Heaven's mercy not upon her, with his crushing, big-boned weight, and she was able to drag herself free of him before he began to kick, in his humiliated efforts to rise. But he could not rise, because he was hurt--and when she, herself, got up, she staggered, and caught at the broken gate, because in her wrenching leap for safety she had twisted her ankle, and for a moment was in cruel pain.

When she recovered from her shock sufficiently to be able to look at the cottage, she saw that it was more of a ruin than it had seemed, even at a short distance. Its door hung open on broken hinges, no smoke rose from the chimney, because there was no one within its walls to light a fire. It was quite empty. Everything about the place lay in dead and utter silence. In a normal mood she would have liked the mystery of the situation, and would have set about planning her way out of her difficulty. But now her mind made no effort, because normal interest in things had fallen away from her. She might be twenty miles from Stornham, but the possible fact did not, at the moment, seem to concern her. (Where is he now--where is he now?) Childe Harold was trying to rise, despite his hurt, and his evident determination touched her. He was too proud to lie in the mire. She limped to him, and tried to steady him by his bridle. He was not badly injured, though plainly in pain.

"Poor boy, it was my fault," she said to him as he at last struggled to

his feet. "I did not know I was doing it. Poor boy!"

He turned a velvet dark eye upon her, and nosed her forgivingly with a warm velvet muzzle, but it was plain that, for the time, he was done for. They both moved haltingly to the broken gate, and Betty fastened him to a thorn tree near it, where he stood on three feet, his fine head drooping.

She pushed the gate open, and went into the house through the door which hung on its hinges. Once inside, she stood still and looked about her. If there was silence and desolateness outside, there was within the deserted place a stillness like the unresponse of death. It had been long since anyone had lived in the cottage, but tramps or gipsies had at times passed through it. Dead, blackened embers lay on the hearth, a bundle of dried grass which had been slept on was piled in the corner, an empty nail keg and a wooden box had been drawn before the big chimney place for some wanderer to sit on when the black embers had been hot and red.

Betty gave one glance around her and sat down upon the box standing on the bare hearth, her head sinking forward, her hands falling clasped between her knees, her eyes on the brick floor.

"Where is he now?" broke from her in a loud whisper, whose sound was mechanical and hollow. "Where is he now?"

And she sat there without moving, while the grey mist from the marshes crept close about the door and through it and stole about her feet.

So she sat long--long--in a heavy, far-off dream.

Along the road a man was riding with a lowering, fretted face. He had come across country on horseback, because to travel by train meant wearisome stops and changes and endlessly slow journeying, annoying beyond endurance to those who have not patience to spare. His ride would have been pleasant enough but for the slow mist-like rain. Also he had taken a wrong turning, because he did not know the roads he travelled. The last signpost he had passed, however, had given him his cue again, and he began to feel something of security. Confound the rain! The best road was slippery with it, and the haze of it made a man's mind feel befogged and lowered his spirits horribly--discouraged him--would worry him into an ill humour even if he had reason to be in a good one. As for him, he had no reason for cheerfulness--he never had for the matter of that, and just now----! What was the matter with his horse? He was lifting his head and sniffing the damp air restlessly, as if he scented or saw something. Beasts often seemed to have a sort of second sight--horses particularly.

What ailed him that he should prick up his ears and snort after his sniffing the mist! Did he hear anything? Yes, he did, it seemed. He gave forth suddenly a loud shrill whinny, turning his head towards a rough lane they were approaching, and immediately from the vicinity of

a deserted-looking cottage behind a hedge came a sharp but mournful-sounding neigh in answer.

"What horse is that?" said Nigel Anstruthers, drawing in at the entrance to the lane and looking down it. "There is a fine brute with a side-saddle on," he added sharply. "He is waiting for someone. What is a woman doing there at this time? Is it a rendezvous? A good place----"

He broke off short and rode forward. "I'm hanged if it is not Childe Harold," he broke out, and he had no sooner assured himself of the fact than he threw himself from his saddle, tethered his horse and strode up the path to the broken-hinged door.

He stood on the threshold and stared. What a hole it was--what a hole! And there SHE sat--alone--eighteen or twenty miles from home--on a turned-up box near the black embers, her hands clasped loosely between her knees, her face rather awful, her eyes staring at the floor, as if she did not see it.

"Where is he now?" he heard her whisper to herself with soft weirdness. "Where is he now?"

Sir Nigel stepped into the place and stood before her. He had smiled with a wry unpleasantness when he had heard her evidently unconscious words.

"My good girl," he said, "I am sure I do not know where he is--but it is very evident that he ought to be here, since you have amiably put yourself to such trouble. It is fortunate for you perhaps that I am here before him. What does this mean?" the question breaking from him with savage authority.

He had dragged her back to earth. She sat upright and recognised him with a hideous sense of shock, but he did not give her time to speak. His instinct of male fury leaped within him.

"YOU!" he cried out. "It takes a woman like you to come and hide herself in a place of this sort, like a trolloping gipsy wench! It takes a New York millionairess or a Roman empress or one of Charles the Second's duchesses to plunge as deep as this. You, with your golden pedestal--you, with your ostentatious airs and graces--you, with your condescending to give a man a chance to repent his sins and turn over a new leaf! Damn it," rising to a sort of frenzy, "what are you doing waiting in a hole like this--in this weather--at this hour--you--you!"

The fool's flame leaped high enough to make him start forward, as if to seize her by the shoulder and shake her.

But she rose and stepped back to lean against the side of the chimney--to brace herself against it, so that she could stand in her lame foot's despite. Every drop of blood had been swept from her face, and her eyes looked immense. His coming was a good thing for her, though

she did not know it. It brought her back from unearthly places. All her child hatred woke and blazed in her. Never had she hated a thing so, and it set her slow, cold blood running like something molten.

"Hold your tongue!" she said in a clear, awful young voice of warning. "And take care not to touch me. If you do--I have my whip here--I shall lash you across your mouth!"

He broke into ribald laughter. A certain sudden thought which had cut into him like a knife thrust into flesh drove him on.

"Do!" he cried. "I should like to carry your mark back to Stornham--and tell people why it was given. I know who you are here for. Only such fellows ask such things of women. But he was determined to be safe, if you hid in a ditch. You are here for Mount Dunstan--and he has failed you!"

But she only stood and stared at him, holding her whip behind her, knowing that at any moment he might snatch it from her hand. And she knew how poor a weapon it was. To strike out with it would only infuriate him and make him a wild beast. And it was becoming an agony to stand upon her foot. And even if it had not been so--if she had been strong enough to make a leap and dash past him, her horse stood outside disabled.

Nigel Anstruthers' eyes ran over her from head to foot, down the side of

her mud-stained habit, while a curious light dawned in them.

"You have had a fall from your horse," he exclaimed. "You are lame!" Then quickly, "That was why Childe Harold was trembling and standing on three feet! By Jove!"

Then he sat down on the nail keg and began to laugh. He laughed for a full minute, but she saw he did not take his eyes from her.

"You are in as unpleasant a situation as a young woman can well be," he said, when he stopped. "You came to a dirty hole to be alone with a man who felt it safest not to keep his appointment. Your horse stumbled and disabled himself and you. You are twenty miles from home in a deserted cottage in a lane no one passes down even in good weather. You are frightened to death and you have given me even a better story to play with than your sister gave me. By Jove!"

His face was an unholy thing to look upon. The situation and her powerlessness were exciting him.

"No," she answered, keeping her eyes on his, as she might have kept them on some wild animal's, "I am not frightened to death."

His ugly dark flush rose.

"Well, if you are not," he said, "don't tell me so. That kind of

defiance is not your best line just now. You have been disdaining me from magnificent New York heights for some time. Do you think that I am not enjoying this?"

"I cannot imagine anyone else who would enjoy it so much." And she knew the answer was daring, but would have made it if he had held a knife's point at her throat.

He got up, and walking to the door drew it back on its crazy hinges and managed to shut it close. There was a big wooden bolt inside and he forced it into its socket.

"Presently I shall go and put the horses into the cowshed," he said. "If I leave them standing outside they will attract attention. I do not intend to be disturbed by any gipsy tramp who wants shelter. I have never had you quite to myself before."

He sat down again and nursed his knee gracefully.

"And I have never seen you look as attractive," biting his under lip in cynical enjoyment. "To-day's adventure has roused your emotions and actually beautified you--which was not necessary. I daresay you have been furious and have cried. Your eyes do not look like mere eyes, but like splendid blue pools of tears. Perhaps I shall make you cry sometime, my dear Betty."

"No, you will not."

"Don't tempt me. Women always cry when men annoy them. They rage, but they cry as well."

"I shall not."

"It's true that most women would have begun to cry before this. That is what stimulates me. You will swagger to the end. You put the devil into me. Half an hour ago I was jogging along the road, languid and bored to extinction. And now----" He laughed outright in actual exultation. "By Jove!" he cried out. "Things like this don't happen to a man in these dull days! There's no such luck going about. We've gone back five hundred years, and we've taken New York with us." His laugh shut off in the middle, and he got up to thrust his heavy, congested face close to hers. "Here you are, as safe as if you were in a feudal castle, and here is your ancient enemy given his chance--given his chance. Do you think, by the Lord, he is going to give it up? No. To quote your own words, 'you may place entire confidence in that.'"

Exaggerated as it all was, somehow the melodrama dropped away from it and left bare, simple, hideous fact for her to confront. The evil in him had risen rampant and made him lose his head. He might see his senseless folly to-morrow and know he must pay for it, but he would not see it to-day. The place was not a feudal castle, but what he said was insurmountable truth. A ruined cottage on the edge of miles of marsh

land, a seldom-trodden road, and night upon them! A wind was rising on the marshes now, and making low, steady moan. Horrible things had happened to women before, one heard of them with shudders when they were recorded in the newspapers. Only two days ago she had remembered that sometimes there seemed blunderings in the great Scheme of things. Was all this real, or was she dreaming that she stood here at bay, her back against the chimney-wall, and this degenerate exulting over her, while Rosy was waiting for her at Stornham--and at this very hour her father was planning his journey across the Atlantic?

"Why did you not behave yourself?" demanded Nigel Anstruthers, shaking her by the shoulder. "Why did you not realise that I should get even with you one day, as sure as you were woman and I was man?"

She did not shrink back, though the pupils of her eyes dilated. Was it the wildest thing in the world which happened to her--or was it not? Without warning--the sudden rush of a thought, immense and strange, swept over her body and soul and possessed her--so possessed her that it changed her pallor to white flame. It was actually Anstruthers who shrank back a shade because, for the moment, she looked so near unearthly.

"I am not afraid of you," she said, in a clear, unshaken voice. "I am not afraid. Something is near me which will stand between us--something which DIED to-day."

He almost gasped before the strangeness of it, but caught back his breath and recovered himself.

"Died to-day! That's recent enough," he jeered. "Let us hear about it. Who was it?"

"It was Mount Dunstan," she flung at him. "The church-bells were tolling for him when I rode away. I could not stay to hear them. It killed me--I loved him. You were right when you said it. I loved him, though he never knew. I shall always love him--though he never knew. He knows now. Those who died cannot go away when THAT is holding them. They must stay.
Because I loved him, he may be in this place. I call on him----" raising her clear voice. "I call on him to stand between us."

He backed away from her, staring an evil, enraptured stare.

"What! There is that much temperament in you?" he said. "That was what I half-suspected when I saw you first. But you have hidden it well. Now it bursts forth in spite of you. Good Lord! What luck--what luck!"

He moved to the door and opened it.

"I am a very modern man, and I enjoy this to the utmost," he said. "What I like best is the melodrama of it--in connection with Fifth Avenue.

I am perfectly aware that you will not discuss this incident in the future. You are a clever enough young woman to know that it will be more to your interest than to mine that it shall be kept exceedingly quiet."

The white fire had not died out of her and she stood straight.

"What I have called on will be near me, and will stand between us," she said.

Old though it was, the door was massive and heavy to lift. To open it cost him some muscular effort.

"I am going to the horses now," he explained before he dragged it back into its frame and shut her in. "It is safe enough to leave you here. You will stay where you are."

He felt himself secure in leaving her because he believed she could not move, and because his arrogance made it impossible for him to count on strength and endurance greater than his own. Of endurance he knew nothing and in his keen and cynical exultance his devil made a fool of him.

As she heard him walk down the path to the gate, Betty stood amazed at his lack of comprehension of her.

"He thinks I will stay here. He absolutely thinks I will wait until he

comes back," she whispered to the emptiness of the bare room.

Before he had arrived she had loosened her boot, and now she stooped and touched her foot.

"If I were safe at home I should think I could not walk, but I can walk now--I can--I can--because I will bear the pain."

In such cottages there is always a door opening outside from the little bricked kitchen, where the copper stands. She would reach that, and, passing through, would close it behind her. After that SOMETHING would tell her what to do--something would lead her.

She put her lame foot upon the floor, and rested some of her weight upon it--not all. A jagged pain shot up from it through her whole side it seemed, and, for an instant, she swayed and ground her teeth.

"That is because it is the first step," she said. "But if I am to be killed, I will die in the open--I will die in the open."

The second and third steps brought cold sweat out upon her, but she told herself that the fourth was not quite so unbearable, and she stiffened her whole body, and muttered some words while she took a fifth and sixth which carried her into the tiny back kitchen.

"Father," she said. "Father, think of me now--think of me! Rosy, love

me--love me and pray that I may come home. You--you who have died, stand

very near!"

If her father ever held her safe in his arms again--if she ever awoke from this nightmare, it would be a thing never to let one's mind hark back to again--to shut out of memory with iron doors.

The pain had shot up and down, and her forehead was wet by the time she had reached the small back door. Was it locked or bolted--was it? She put her hand gently upon the latch and lifted it without making any sound. Thank God Almighty, it was neither bolted nor locked, the latch lifted, the door opened, and she slid through it into the shadow of the grey which was already almost the darkness of night. Thank God for that, too.

She flattened herself against the outside wall and listened. He was having difficulty in managing Childe Harold, who snorted and pulled back, offended and made rebellious by his savagely impatient hand. Good Childe Harold, good boy! She could see the massed outline of the trees of the spinney. If she could bear this long enough to get there--even if she crawled part of the way. Then it darted through her mind that he would guess that she would be sure to make for its cover, and that he would go there first to search.

"Father, think for me--you were so quick to think!" her brain cried out

for her, as if she was speaking to one who could physically hear.

She almost feared she had spoken aloud, and the thought which flashed upon her like lightning seemed to be an answer given. He would be convinced that she would at once try to get away from the house. If she kept near it--somewhere--somewhere quite close, and let him search the spinney, she might get away to its cover after he gave up the search and came back. The jagged pain had settled in a sort of impossible anguish, and once or twice she felt sick. But she would die in the open--and she knew Rosalie was frightened by her absence, and was praying for her. Prayers counted and, yet, they had all prayed yesterday.

"If I were not very strong, I should faint," she thought. "But I have been strong all my life. That great French doctor--I have forgotten his name--said that I had the physique to endure anything."

She said these things that she might gain steadiness and convince herself that she was not merely living through a nightmare. Twice she moved her foot suddenly because she found herself in a momentary respite from pain, beginning to believe that the thing was a nightmare--that nothing mattered--because she would wake up presently--so she need not try to hide.

"But in a nightmare one has no pain. It is real and I must go somewhere," she said, after the foot was moved. Where could she go? She had not looked at the place as she rode up. She had only

half-consciously seen the spinney. Nigel was swearing at the horses. Having got Childe Harold into the shed, there seemed to be nothing to fasten his bridle to. And he had yet to bring his own horse in and secure him. She must get away somewhere before the delay was over.

How dark it was growing! Thank God for that again! What was the rather high, dark object she could trace in the dimness near the hedge? It was sharply pointed, is if it were a narrow tent. Her heart began to beat like a drum as she recalled something. It was the shape of the sort of wigwam structure made of hop poles, after they were taken from the fields. If there was space between it and the hedge--even a narrow space--and she could crouch there? Nigel was furious because Childe Harold was backing, plunging, and snorting dangerously. She halted forward, shutting her teeth in her terrible pain. She could scarcely see, and did not recognise that near the wigwam was a pile of hop poles laid on top of each other horizontally. It was not quite as high as the hedge whose dark background prevented its being seen. Only a few steps more. No, she was awake--in a nightmare one felt only terror, not pain.

"YOU, WHO DIED TO-DAY," she murmured.

She saw the horizontal poles too late. One of them had rolled from its place and lay on the ground, and she trod on it, was thrown forward against the heap, and, in her blind effort to recover herself, slipped and fell into a narrow, grassed hollow behind it, clutching at the hedge. The great French doctor had not been quite right. For the

first time in her life she felt herself sinking into bottomless darkness--which was what happened to people when they fainted.

When she opened her eyes she could see nothing, because on one side of her rose the low mass of the hop poles, and on the other was the long-untrimmed hedge, which had thrown out a thick, sheltering growth and curved above her like a penthouse. Was she awakening, after all? No, because the pain was awakening with her, and she could hear, what seemed at first to be quite loud sounds. She could not have been unconscious long, for she almost immediately recognised that they were the echo of a man's hurried footsteps upon the bare wooden stairway, leading to the bedrooms in the empty house. Having secured the horses, Nigel had returned to the cottage, and, finding her gone had rushed to the upper floor in search of her. He was calling her name angrily, his voice resounding in the emptiness of the rooms.

"Betty; don't play the fool with me!"

She cautiously drew herself further under cover, making sure that no end of her habit remained in sight. The overgrowth of the hedge was her salvation. If she had seen the spot by daylight, she would not have thought it a possible place of concealment.

Once she had read an account of a woman's frantic flight from a murderer who was hunting her to her death, while she slipped from one poor hiding place to another, sometimes crouching behind walls or bushes, sometimes

lying flat in long grass, once wading waist-deep through a stream, and at last finding a miserable little fastness, where she hid shivering for hours, until her enemy gave up his search. One never felt the reality of such histories, but there was actually a sort of parallel in this. Mad and crude things were let loose, and the world of ordinary life seemed thousands of miles away.

She held her breath, for he was leaving the house by the front door. She heard his footsteps on the bricked path, and then in the lane. He went to the road, and the sound of his feet died away for a few moments. Then she heard them returning--he was back in the lane--on the brick path, and stood listening or, perhaps, reflecting. He muttered something exclamatory, and she heard a match struck, and shortly afterwards he moved across the garden patch towards the little spinney. He had thought of it, as she had believed he would. He would not think of this place, and in the end he might get tired or awakened to a sense of his lurid folly, and realise that it would be safer for him to go back to Stornham with some clever lie, trusting to his belief that there existed no girl but would shrink from telling such a story in connection with a man who would brazenly deny it with contemptuous dramatic detail. If he would but decide on this, she would be safe--and it would be so like him that she dared to hope. But, if he did not, she would lie close, even if she must wait until morning, when some labourer's cart would surely pass, and she would hear it jolting, and drag herself out, and call aloud in such a way that no man could be deaf. There was more room under her hedge than she had thought, and she found that she could sit up, by

clasping her knees and bending her head, while she listened to every sound, even to the rustle of the grass in the wind sweeping across the marsh.

She moved very gradually and slowly, and had just settled into utter motionlessness when she realised that he was coming back through the garden--the straggling currant and gooseberry bushes were being trampled through.

"Betty, go home," Rosalie had pleaded. "Go home--go home." And she had refused, because she could not desert her.

She held her breath and pressed her hand against her side, because her heart beat, as it seemed to her, with an actual sound. He moved with unsteady steps from one point to another, more than once he stumbled, and his angry oath reached her; at last he was so near her hiding place that his short hard breathing was a distinct sound. A moment later he spoke, raising his voice, which fact brought to her a rush of relief, through its signifying that he had not even guessed her nearness.

"My dear Betty," he said, "you have the pluck of the devil, but circumstances are too much for you. You are not on the road, and I have been through the spinney. Mere logic convinces me that you cannot be far away. You may as well give the thing up. It will be better for you."

"You who died to-day--do not leave me," was Betty's inward cry, and she

dropped her face on her knees.

"I am not a pleasant-tempered fellow, as you know, and I am losing my hold on myself. The wind is blowing the mist away, and there will be a moon. I shall find you, my good girl, in half an hour's time--and then we shall be jolly well even."

She had not dropped her whip, and she held it tight. If, when the moonlight revealed the pile of hop poles to him, he suspected and sprang at them to tear them away, she would be given strength to make one spring, even in her agony, and she would strike at his eyes--awfully, without one touch of compunction--she would strike--strike.

There was a brief silence, and then a match was struck again, and almost immediately she inhaled the fragrance of an excellent cigar.

"I am going to have a comfortable smoke and stroll about--always within sight and hearing. I daresay you are watching me, and wondering what will happen when I discover you, I can tell you what will happen. You are not a hysterical girl, but you will go into hysterics--and no one will hear you."

(All the power of her--body and soul--in one leap on him and then a lash that would cut to the bone. And it was not a nightmare--and Rosy was at Stornham, and her father looking over steamer lists and choosing his staterooms.)

He walked about slowly, the scent of his cigar floating behind him. She noticed, as she had done more than once before, that he seemed to slightly drag one foot, and she wondered why. The wind was blowing the mist away, and there was a faint growing of light. The moon was not full, but young, and yet it would make a difference. But the upper part of the hedge grew thick and close to the heap of wood, and, but for her fall, she would never have dreamed of the refuge.

She could only guess at his movements, but his footsteps gave some clue. He was examining the ground in as far as the darkness would allow. He went into the shed and round about it, he opened the door of the tiny coal lodge, and looked again into the small back kitchen. He came near--nearer--so near once that, bending sidewise, she could have put out a hand and touched him. He stood quite still, then made a step or so away, stood still again, and burst into a laugh once more.

"Oh, you are here, are you?" he said. "You are a fine big girl to be able to crowd yourself into a place like that!"

Hot and cold dew stood out on her forehead and made her hair damp as she held her whip hard.

"Come out, my dear!" alluringly. "It is not too soon. Or do you prefer that I should assist you?"

Her heart stood quite still--quite. He was standing by the wigwam of hop poles and thought she had hidden herself inside it. Her place under the hedge he had not even glanced at.

She knew he bent down and thrust his arm into the wigwam, for his fury at the result expressed itself plainly enough. That he had made a fool of himself was worse to him than all else. He actually wheeled about and strode away to the house.

Because minutes seemed hours, she thought he was gone long, but he was not away for twenty minutes. He had, in fact, gone into the bare front room again, and sitting upon the box near the hearth, let his head drop in his hands and remained in this position thinking. In the end he got up and went out to the shed where he had left the horses.

Betty was feeling that before long she might find herself making that strange swoop into the darkness of space again, and that it did not matter much, as one apparently lay quite still when one was unconscious--when she heard that one horse was being led out into the lane. What did that mean? Had he got tired of the chase--as the other man did--and was he going away because discomfort and fatigue had cooled and disgusted him--perhaps even made him feel that he was playing the part of a sensational idiot who was laying himself open to derision? That would be like him, too.

Presently she heard his footsteps once more, but he did not come as near

her as before--in fact, he stood at some yards' distance when he stopped and spoke--in quite a new manner.

"Betty," his tone was even cynically cool, "I shall stalk you no more. The chase is at an end. I think I have taken all out of you I intended to. Perhaps it was a bad joke and was carried too far. I wanted to prove to you that there were circumstances which might be too much even for a young woman from New York. I have done it. Do you suppose I am such a fool as to bring myself within reach of the law? I am going away and will send assistance to you from the next house I pass. I have left some matches and a few broken sticks on the hearth in the cottage. Be a sensible girl. Limp in there and build yourself a fire as soon as you hear me gallop away. You must be chilled through. Now I am going."

He tramped across the bit of garden, down the brick path, mounted his horse and put it to a gallop at once. Clack, clack, clack--clacking fainter and fainter into the distance--and he was gone.

When she realised that the thing was true, the effect upon her of her sense of relief was that the growing likelihood of a second swoop into darkness died away, but one curious sob lifted her chest as she leaned back against the rough growth behind her. As she changed her position for a better one she felt the jagged pain again and knew that in the tenseness of her terror she had actually for some time felt next to nothing of her hurt. She had not even been cold, for the hedge behind and over her and the barricade before had protected her from both wind

and rain. The grass beneath her was not damp for the same reason. The weary thought rose in her mind that she might even lie down and sleep. But she pulled herself together and told herself that this was like the temptation of believing in the nightmare. He was gone, and she had a respite--but was it to be anything more? She did not make any attempt to leave her place of concealment, remembering the strange things she had learned in watching him, and the strange terror in which Rosalie lived.

"One never knows what he will do next; I will not stir," she said through her teeth. "No, I will not stir from here."

And she did not, but sat still, while the pain came back to her body and the anguish to her heart--and sometimes such heaviness that her head dropped forward upon her knees again, and she fell into a stupefied half-doze.

From one such doze she awakened with a start, hearing a slight click of the gate. After it, there were several seconds of dead silence. It was the slightness of the click which was startling--if it had not been caused by the wind, it had been caused by someone's having cautiously moved it--and this someone wishing to make a soundless approach had immediately stood still and was waiting. There was only one person who would do that. By this time, the mist being blown away, the light of the moon began to make a growing clearness. She lifted her hand and delicately held aside a few twigs that she might look out.

She had been quite right in deciding not to move. Nigel Anstruthers had come back, and after his pause turned, and avoiding the brick path, stole over the grass to the cottage door. His going had merely been an inspiration to trap her, and the wood and matches had been intended to make a beacon light for him. That was like him, as well. His horse he had left down the road.

But the relief of his absence had been good for her, and she was able to check the shuddering fit which threatened her for a moment. The next, her ears awoke to a new sound. Something was stumbling heavily about the patch of garden--some animal. A cropping of grass, a snorting breath, and more stumbling hoofs, and she knew that Childe Harold had managed to loosen his bridle and limp out of the shed. The mere sense of his nearness seemed a sort of protection.

He had limped and stumbled to the front part of the garden before Nigel heard him. When he did hear, he came out of the house in the humour of a man the inflaming of whose mood has been cumulative; Childe Harold's temper also was not to be trifled with. He threw up his head, swinging the bridle out of reach; he snorted, and even reared with an ugly lashing of his forefeet.

"Good boy!" whispered Betty. "Do not let him take you--do not!"

If he remained where he was he would attract attention if anyone passed by. "Fight, Childe Harold, be as vicious as you choose--do not allow

yourself to be dragged back."

And fight he did, with an ugliness of temper he had never shown before--with snortings and tossed head and lashed--out heels, as if he knew he was fighting to gain time and with a purpose.

But in the midst of the struggle Nigel Anstruthers stopped suddenly. He had stumbled again, and risen raging and stained with damp earth. Now he stood still, panting for breath--as still as he had stood after the click of the gate. Was he--listening? What was he listening to? Had she moved in her excitement, and was it possible he had caught the sound? No, he was listening to something else. Far up the road it echoed, but coming nearer every moment, and very fast. Another horse--a big one--galloping hard. Whosoever it was would pass this place; it could only be a man--God grant that he would not go by so quickly that his attention would not be arrested by a shriek! Cry out she must--and if he did not hear and went galloping on his way she would have betrayed herself and be lost.

She bit off a groan by biting her lip.

"You who died to-day--now--now!"

Nearer and nearer. No human creature could pass by a thing like this--it would not be possible. And Childe Harold, backing and fighting, scented the other horse and neighed fiercely and high. The rider was slackening

his pace; he was near the lane. He had turned into it and stopped. Now for her one frantic cry--but before she could gather power to give it forth, the man who had stopped had flung himself from his saddle and was inside the garden speaking. A big voice and a clear one, with a ringing tone of authority.

"What are you doing here? And what is the matter with Miss Vanderpoel's horse?" it called out.

Now there was danger of the swoop into the darkness--great danger--though she clutched at the hedge that she might feel its thorns and hold herself to the earth.

"YOU!" Nigel Anstruthers cried out. "You!" and flung forth a shout of laughter.

"Where is she?" fiercely. "Lady Anstruthers is terrified. We have been searching for hours. Only just now I heard on the marsh that she had been seen to ride this way. Where is she, I say?"

A strong, angry, earthly voice--not part of the melodrama--not part of a dream, but a voice she knew, and whose sound caused her heart to leap to her throat, while she trembled from head to foot, and a light, cold dampness broke forth on her skin. Something had been a dream--her wild, desolate ride--the slew tolling; for the voice which commanded with such human fierceness was that of the man for whom the heavy bell had struck

forth from the church tower.

Sir Nigel recovered himself brilliantly. Not that he did not recognise that he had been a fool again and was in a nasty place; but it was not for the first time in his life, and he had learned how to brazen himself out of nasty places.

"My dear Mount Dunstan," he answered with tolerant irritation, "I have been having a devil of a time with female hysterics. She heard the bell toll and ran away with the idea that it was for you, and paid you the compliment of losing her head. I came on her here when she had ridden her horse half to death and they had both come a cropper. Confound women's hysterics! I could do nothing with her. When I left her for a moment she ran away and hid herself. She is concealed somewhere on the place or has limped off on to the marsh. I wish some New York millionairess would work herself into hysteria on my humble account."

"Those are lies," Mount Dunstan answered--"every damned one of them!"

He wheeled around to look about him, attracted by a sound, and in the clearing moonlight saw a figure approaching which might have risen from the earth, so far as he could guess where it had come from. He strode over to it, and it was Betty Vanderpoel, holding her whip in a clenched hand and showing to his eagerness such hunted face and eyes as were barely human. He caught her unsteadiness to support it, and felt her fingers clutch at the tweed of his coatsleeve and move there as if the

mere feeling of its rough texture brought heavenly comfort to her and gave her strength.

"Yes, they are lies, Lord Mount Dunstan," she panted. "He said that he meant to get what he called 'even' with me. He told me I could not get away from him and that no one would hear me if I cried out for help. I have hidden like some hunted animal." Her shaking voice broke, and she held the cloth of his sleeve tightly. "You are alive--alive!" with a sudden sweet wildness. "But it is true the bell tolled! While I was crouching in the dark I called to you--who died to-day--to stand between us!"

The man absolutely shuddered from head to foot.

"I was alive, and you see I heard you and came," he answered hoarsely.

He lifted her in his arms and carried her into the cottage. Her cheek felt the enrapturing roughness of his tweed shoulder as he did it. He laid her down on the couch of hay and turned away.

"Don't move," he said. "I will come back. You are safe."

If there had been more light she would have seen that his jaw was set like a bulldog's, and there was a red spark in his eyes--a fearsome one. But though she did not clearly see, she KNEW, and the nearness of the last hours swept away all relenting.

Nigel Anstruthers having discreetly waited until the two had passed into the house, and feeling that a man would be an idiot who did not remove himself from an atmosphere so highly charged, was making his way toward the lane and was, indeed, halfway through the gate when heavy feet were behind him and a grip of ugly strength wrenched him backward.

"Your horse is cropping the grass where you left him, but you are not going to him," said a singularly meaning voice. "You are coming with me."

Anstruthers endeavoured to convince himself that he did not at that moment turn deadly sick and that the brute would not make an ass of himself.

"Don't be a bally fool!" he cried out, trying to tear himself free.

The muscular hand on his shoulder being reinforced by another, which clutched his collar, dragged him back, stumbling ignominiously through the gooseberry bushes towards the cart-shed. Betty lying upon her bed of hay heard the scuffling, mingled with raging and gasping curses. Childe Harold, lifting his head from his cropping of the grass, looked after the violently jerking figures and snorted slightly, snuffing with dilated red nostrils. As a war horse scenting blood and battle, he was excited.

When Mount Dunstan got his captive into the shed the blood which had surged in Red Godwyn's veins was up and leaping. Anstruthers, his collar held by a hand with fingers of iron, writhed about and turned a livid, ghastly face upon his captor.

"You have twice my strength and half my age, you beast and devil!" he foamed in a half shriek, and poured forth frightful blasphemies.

"That counts between man and man, but not between vermin and executioner," gave back Mount Dunstan.

The heavy whip, flung upward, whistled down through the air, cutting through cloth and linen as though it would cut through flesh to bone.

"By God!" shrieked the writhing thing he held, leaping like a man who has been shot. "Don't do that again! DAMN you!" as the unswerving lash cut down again--again.

What followed would not be good to describe. Betty through the open door heard wild and awful things--and more than once a sound as if a dog were howling.

When the thing was over, one of the two--his clothes cut to ribbons, his torn white linen exposed, lay, a writhing, huddled worm, hiccoughing frenzied sobs upon the earth in a corner of the cart-shed. The other man stood over him, breathless and white, but singularly exalted.

"You won't want your horse to-night, because you can't use him," he said. "I shall put Miss Vanderpoel's saddle upon him and ride with her back to Stornham. You think you are cut to pieces, but you are not, and you'll get over it. I'll ask you to mark, however, that if you open your foul mouth to insinuate lies concerning either Lady Anstruthers or her sister I will do this thing again in public some day--on the steps of your club--and do it more thoroughly."

He walked into the cottage soon afterwards looking, to Betty Vanderpoel's eyes, pale and exceptionally big, and also more a man than it is often given even to the most virile male creature to look--and he walked to the side of her resting place and stood there looking down.

"I thought I heard a dog howl," she said.

"You did hear a dog howl," he answered. He said no other word, and she asked no further question. She knew what he had done, and he was well aware that she knew it.

There was a long, strangely tense silence. The light of the moon was growing. She made at first no effort to rise, but lay still and looked up at him from under splendid lifted lashes, while his own gaze fell into the depth of hers like a plummet into a deep pool. This continued for almost a full minute, when he turned quickly away and walked to the hearth, indrawing a heavy breath.

He could not endure that which beset him; it was unbearable, because her eyes had maddeningly seemed to ask him some wistful question. Why did she let her loveliness so call to him. She was not a trifler who could play with meanings. Perhaps she did not know what her power was. Sometimes he could believe that beautiful women did not.

In a few moments, almost before he could reach her, she was rising, and when she got up she supported herself against the open door, standing in the moonlight. If he was pale, she was pale also, and her large eyes would not move from his face, so drawing him that he could not keep away from her.

"Listen," he broke out suddenly. "Penzance told me--warned me--that some time a moment would come which would be stronger than all else in a man--than all else in the world. It has come now. Let me take you home."

"Than what else?" she said slowly, and became even paler than before.

He strove to release himself from the possession of the moment, and in his struggle answered with a sort of savagery.

"Than scruple--than power--even than a man's determination and decent pride."

"Are you proud?" she half whispered quite brokenly. "I am not--since I

waited for the ringing of the church bell--since I heard it toll. After that the world was empty--and it was as empty of decent pride as of everything else. There was nothing left. I was the humblest broken thing on earth."

"You!" he gasped. "Do you know I think I shall go mad directly perhaps it is happening now. YOU were humble and broken--your world was empty! Because----?"

"Look at me, Lord Mount Dunstan," and the sweetest voice in the world was a tender, wild little cry to him. "Oh LOOK at me!"

He caught her out-thrown hands and looked down into the beautiful passionate soul of her. The moment had come, and the tidal wave rising to its height swept all the common earth away when, with a savage sob, he caught and held her close and hard against that which thudded racing in his breast.

And they stood and swayed together, folded in each other's arms, while the wind from the marshes lifted its voice like an exulting human thing as it swept about them.