CHAPTER XLIX

AT STORNHAM AND AT BROADMORLANDS

The exulting wind had swept the clouds away, and the moon rode in a dark blue sea of sky, making the night light purely clear, when they drew a little apart, that they might better see the wonderfulness in each other's faces. It was so mysteriously great a thing that they felt near to awe.

"I fought too long. I wore out my body's endurance, and now I am quaking like a boy. Red Godwyn did not begin his wooing like this. Forgive me," Mount Dunstan said at last.

"Do you know," with lovely trembling lips and voice, "that for long--long--you have been unkind to me?"

It was merely human that he should swiftly enfold her again, and answer with his lips against her cheek.

"Unkind! Unkind! Oh, the heavenly woman's sweetness of your telling me so--the heavenly sweetness of it!" he exclaimed passionately and low. "And I was one of those who are 'by the roadside everywhere,' an unkempt, raging beggar, who might not decently ask you for a crust."

"It was all wrong--wrong!" she whispered back to him, and he poured

forth the tenderest, fierce words of confession and prayer, and she listened, drinking them in, with now and then a soft sob pressed against the roughness of the enrapturing tweed. For a space they had both forgotten her hurt, because there are other things than terror which hypnotise pain. Mount Dunstan was to be praised for remembering it first. He must take her back to Stornham and her sister without further delay.

"I will put your saddle on Anstruthers' horse, or mine, and lift you to your seat. There is a farmhouse about two miles away, where I will take you first for food and warmth. Perhaps it would be well for you to stay there to rest for an hour or so, and I will send a message to Lady Anstruthers."

"I will go to the place, and eat and drink what you advise," she answered. "But I beg you to take me back to Rosalie without delay. I feel that I must see her."

"I feel that I must see her, too," he said. "But for her--God bless her!" he added, after his sudden pause.

Betty knew that the exclamation meant strong feeling, and that somehow in the past hours Rosalie had awakened it. But it was only when, after their refreshment at the farm, they had taken horse again and were riding homeward together, that she heard from him what had passed between them.

"All that has led to this may seem the merest chance," he said. "But surely a strange thing has come about. I know that without understanding it." He leaned over and touched her hand. "You, who are Life--without understanding I ride here beside you, believing that you brought me back."

"I tried--I tried! With all my strength, I tried."

"After I had seen your sister to-day, I guessed--I knew. But not at first. I was not ill of the fever, as excited rumour had it; but I was ill, and the doctors and the vicar were alarmed. I had fought too long, and I was giving up, as I have seen the poor fellows in the ballroom give up. If they were not dragged back they slipped out of one's hands. If the fever had developed, all would have been over quickly. I knew the doctors feared that, and I am ashamed to say I was glad of it. But, yesterday, in the morning, when I was letting myself go with a morbid pleasure in the luxurious relief of it--something reached me--some slow rising call to effort and life."

She turned towards him in her saddle, listening, her lips parted.

"I did not even ask myself what was happening, but I began to be conscious of being drawn back, and to long intensely to see you again. I was gradually filled with a restless feeling that you were near me, and that, though I could not physically hear your voice, you were surely

CALLING to me. It was the thing which could not be--but it was--and because of it I could not let myself drift."

"I did call you! I was on my knees in the church asking to be forgiven if I prayed mad prayers--but praying the same thing over and over. The villagers were kneeling there, too. They crowded in, leaving everything else. You are their hero, and they were in deep earnest."

His look was gravely pondering. His life had not made a mystic of him--it was Penzance who was the mystic--but he felt himself perplexed by mysteriously suggestive thought.

"I was brought back--I was brought back," he said. "In the afternoon I fell asleep and slept profoundly until the morning. When I awoke, I realised that I was a remade man. The doctors were almost awed when I first spoke to them. Old Dr. Fenwick died later, and, after I had heard about it, the church bell was tolled. It was heard at Weaver's farmhouse, and, as everybody had been excitedly waiting for the sound, it conveyed but one idea to them--and the boy was sent racing across the fields to Stornham village. Dearest! Dearest!" he exclaimed.

She had bowed her head and burst into passionate sobbing. Because she was not of the women who wept, her moment's passion was strong and bitter.

"It need not have been!" she shuddered. "One cannot bear it--because it

need not have been!"

"Stop your horse a moment," he said, reining in his own, while, with burning eyes and swelling throat, he held and steadied her. But he did not know that neither her sister nor her father had ever seen her in such mood, and that she had never so seen herself.

"You shall not remember it," he said to her.

"I will not," she answered, recovering herself. "But for one moment all the awful hours rushed back. Tell me the rest."

"We did not know that the blunder had been made until a messenger from Dole rode over to inquire and bring messages of condolence. Then we understood what had occurred and I own a sort of frenzy seized me. I knew I must see you, and, though the doctors were horribly nervous, they dare not hold me back. The day before it would not have been believed that I could leave my room. You were crying out to me, and though I did not know, I was answering, body and soul. Penzance knew I must have my way when I spoke to him--mad as it seemed. When I rode through Stornham village, more than one woman screamed at sight of me. I shall not be able to blot out of my mind your sister's face. She will tell you what we said to each other. I rode away from the Court quite half mad----" his voice became very gentle, "because of something she had told me in the first wild moments."

Lady Anstruthers had spent the night moving restlessly from one room to another, and had not been to bed when they rode side by side up the avenue in the early morning sunlight. An under keeper, crossing the park a few hundred yards above them, after one glance, dashed across the sward to the courtyard and the servants' hall. The news flashed electrically through the house, and Rosalie, like a small ghost, came out upon the steps as they reined in. Though her lips moved, she could not speak aloud, as she watched Mount Dunstan lift her sister from her horse.

"Childe Harold stumbled and I hurt my foot," said Betty, trying to be calm.

"I knew he would find you!" Rosalie answered quite faintly. "I knew you would!" turning to Mount Dunstan, adoring him with all the meaning of her small paled face.

She would have been afraid of her memory of what she had said in the strange scene which had taken place before them a few hours ago, but almost before either of the two spoke she knew that a great gulf had been crossed in some one inevitable, though unforeseen, leap. How it had been taken, when or where, did not in the least matter, when she clung to Betty and Betty clung to her.

After a few moments of moved and reverent waiting, the admirable Jennings stepped forward and addressed her in lowered voice.

"There's been little sleep in the village this night, my lady," he murmured earnestly. "I promised they should have a sign, with your permission. If the flag was run up--they're all looking out, and they'd know."

"Run it up, Jennings," Lady Anstruthers answered, "at once."

When it ran up the staff on the tower and fluttered out in gay answering to the morning breeze, children in the village began to run about shouting, men and women appeared at cottage doors, and more than one cap was thrown up in the air. But old Doby and Mrs. Welden, who had been waiting for hours, standing by Mrs. Welden's gate, caught each other's dry, trembling old hands and began to cry.

The Broadmorlands divorce scandal, having made conversation during a season quite forty years before Miss Vanderpoel appeared at Stornham Court, had been laid upon a lower shelf and buried beneath other stories long enough to be forgotten. Only one individual had not forgotten it, and he was the Duke of Broadmorlands himself, in whose mind it remained hideously clear. He had been a young man, honestly and much in love when it first revealed itself to him, and for a few months he had even thought it might end by being his death, notwithstanding that he was strong and in first-rate physical condition. He had been a fine, hearty young man of clean and rather dignified life, though he was not understood to be brilliant of mind. Privately he had ideals connected

with his rank and name which he was not fluent enough clearly to express. After he had realised that he should not die of the public humiliation and disgrace, which seemed to point him out as having been the kind of gullible fool it is scarcely possible to avoid laughing at--or, so it seemed to him in his heart-seared frenzy--he thought it not improbable that he should go mad. He was harried so by memories of lovely little soft ways of Edith's (his wife's name was Edith), of the pretty sound of her laugh, and of her innocent, girlish habit of kneeling down by her bedside every night and morning to say her prayers. This had so touched him that he had sometimes knelt down to say his, too, saying to her, with slight awkward boyishness, that a fellow who had a sort of angel for his wife ought to do his best to believe in the things she believed in.

"And all the time----!" a devil who laughed used to snigger in his ear over and over again, until it was almost like the ticking of a clock during the worst months, when it did not seem probable that a man could feel his brain whirling like a Catherine wheel night and day, and still manage to hold on and not reach the point of howling and shrieking and dashing his skull against wails and furniture.

But that passed in time, and he told himself that he passed with it. Since then he had lived chiefly at Broadmorlands Castle, and was spoken of as a man who had become religious, which was not true, but, having reached the decision that religion was good for most people, he paid a good deal of attention to his church and schools, and was rigorous in

the matter of curates.

He had passed seventy now, and was somewhat despotic and haughty, because a man who is a Duke and does not go out into the world to rub against men of his own class and others, but lives altogether on a great and splendid estate, saluted by every creature he meets, and universally obeyed and counted before all else, is not unlikely to forget that he is a quite ordinary human being, and not a sort of monarch.

He had done his best to forget Edith, who had soon died of being a shady curate's wife in Australia, but he had not been able to encompass it. He used, occasionally, to dream she was kneeling by the bed in her childish nightgown saying her prayers aloud, and would waken crying--as he had cried in those awful young days. Against social immorality or village light-mindedness he was relentlessly savage. He allowed for no palliating or exonerating facts. He began to see red when he heard of or saw lightness in a married woman, and the outside world frequently said that this characteristic bordered on monomania.

Nigel Anstruthers, having met him once or twice, had at first been much amused by him, and had even, by giving him an adroitly careful lead, managed to guide him into an expression of opinion. The Duke, who had heard men of his class discussed, did not in the least like him, notwithstanding his sympathetic suavity of manner and his air of being intelligently impressed by what he heard. Not long afterwards, however, it transpired that the aged rector of Broadmorlands having died, the

living had been given to Ffolliott, and, hearing it, Sir Nigel was not slow to conjecture that quite decently utilisable tools would lie ready to his hand if circumstances pressed; this point of view, it will be seen, being not illogical. A man who had not been a sort of hermit would have heard enough of him to be put on his guard, and one who was a man of the world, looking normally on existence, would have reasoned coolly, and declined to concern himself about what was not his affair. But a parallel might be drawn between Broadmorlands and some old lion wounded sorely in his youth and left to drag his unhealed torment through the years of age. On one subject he had no point of view but his own, and could be roused to fury almost senseless by wholly inadequately supported facts. He presented exactly the material required--and that in mass.

About the time the flag was run up on the tower at Stornham Court a carter, driving whistling on the road near the deserted cottage, was hailed by a man who was walking slowly a few yards ahead of him. The carter thought that he was a tramp, as his clothes were plainly in bad case, which seeing, his answer was an unceremonious grunt, and it certainly did not occur to him to touch his forehead. A minute later, however, he "got a start," as he related afterwards. The tramp was a gentleman whose riding costume was torn and muddied, and who looked "gashly," though he spoke with the manner and authority which Binns, the carter, recognised as that of one of the "gentry" addressing a day-labourer.

"How far is it from here to Medham?" he inquired.

"Medham be about four mile, sir," was the answer. "I be carryin' these 'taters there to market."

"I want to get there. I have met with an accident. My horse took fright at a pheasant starting up rocketting under his nose. He threw me into a hedge and bolted. I'm badly enough bruised to want to reach a town and see a doctor. Can you give me a lift?"

"That I will, sir, ready enough," making room on the seat beside him. "You be bruised bad, sir," he said sympathetically, as his passenger climbed to his place, with a twisted face and uttering blasphemies under his breath.

"Damned badly," he answered. "No bones broken, however."

"That cut on your cheek and neck'll need plasterin', sir."

"That's a scratch. Thorn bush," curtly.

Sympathy was plainly not welcome. In fact Binns was soon of the opinion that here was an ugly customer, gentleman or no gentleman. A jolting cart was, however, not the best place for a man who seemed sore from head to foot, and done for out and out. He sat and ground his teeth, as he clung to the rough seat in the attempt to steady himself. He became

more and more "gashly," and a certain awful light in his eyes alarmed the carter by leaping up at every jolt. Binns was glad when he left him at Medham Arms, and felt he had earned the half-sovereign handed to him.

Four days Anstruthers lay in bed in a room at the Inn. No one saw him but the man who brought him food. He did not send for a doctor, because he did not wish to see one. He sent for such remedies as were needed by a man who had been bruised by a fall from his horse. He made no remark which could be considered explanatory, after he had said irritably that a man was a fool to go loitering along on a nervous brute who needed watching. Whatsoever happened was his own damned fault.

Through hours of day and night he lay staring at the whitewashed beams or the blue roses on the wall paper. They were long hours, and filled with things not pleasant enough to dwell on in detail. Physical misery which made a man writhe at times was not the worst part of them. There were a thousand things less endurable. More than once he foamed at the mouth, and recognised that he gibbered like a madman.

There was but one memory which saved him from feeling that this was the very end of things. That was the memory of Broadmorlands. While a man had a weapon left, even though it could not save him, he might pay up with it--get almost even. The whole Vanderpoel lot could be plunged neck deep in a morass which would leave mud enough sticking to them, even if their money helped them to prevent its entirely closing over their heads. He could attend to that, and, after he had set it well going, he

could get out. There were India, South Africa, Australia--a dozen places that would do. And then he would remember Betty Vanderpoel, and curse horribly under the bed clothes. It was the memory of Betty which outdid all others in its power to torment.

On the morning of the fifth day the Duke of Broadmorlands received a note, which he read with somewhat annoyed curiosity. A certain Sir Nigel Anstruthers, whom it appeared he ought to be able to recall, was in the neighbourhood, and wished to see him on a parochial matter of interest. "Parochial matter" was vague, and so was the Duke's recollection of the man who addressed him. If his memory served him rightly, he had met him in a country house in Somersetshire, and had heard that he was the acquaintance of the disreputable eldest son. What could a person of that sort have to say of parochial matters? The Duke considered, and then, in obedience to a rigorous conscience, decided that one ought, perhaps, to give him half an hour.

There was that in the intruder's aspect, when he arrived in the afternoon, which produced somewhat the effect of shock. In the first place, a man in his unconcealable physical condition had no right to be out of his bed. Though he plainly refused to admit the fact, his manner of bearing himself erect, and even with a certain touch of cool swagger, was, it was evident, achieved only by determined effort. He looked like a man who had not yet recovered from some evil fever. Since the meeting in Somersetshire he had aged more than the year warranted. Despite his obstinate fight with himself it was obvious that he was horribly shaky.

A disagreeable scratch or cut, running from cheek to neck, did not improve his personal appearance.

He pleased his host no more than he had pleased him at their first encounter; he, in fact, repelled him strongly, by suggesting a degree of abnormality of mood which was smoothed over by an attempt at entire normality of manner. The Duke did not present an approachable front as, after Anstruthers had taken a chair, he sat and examined him with bright blue old eyes set deep on either side of a dominant nose and framed over by white eyebrows. No, Nigel Anstruthers summed him up, it would not be easy to open the matter with the old fool. He held himself magnificently aloof, with that lack of modernity in his sense of place which, even at this late day, sometimes expressed itself here and there in the manner of the feudal survival.

"I am afraid you have been ill," with rigid civility.

"A man feels rather an outsider in confessing he has let his horse throw him into a hedge. It was my own fault entirely. I allowed myself to forget that I was riding a dangerously nervous brute. I was thinking of a painful and absorbing subject. I was badly bruised and scratched, but that was all."

"What did your doctor say?"

"That I was in luck not to have broken my neck."

"You had better have a glass of wine," touching a bell. "You do not look equal to any exertion."

In gathering himself together, Sir Nigel felt he was forced to use enormous effort. It had cost him a gruesome physical struggle to endure the drive over to Broadmorlands, though it was only a few miles from Medham. There had been something unnatural in the exertion necessary to sit upright and keep his mind decently clear. That was the worst of it. The fever and raging hours of the past days and nights had so shaken him that he had become exhausted, and his brain was not alert. He was not thinking rapidly, and several times he had lost sight of a point it was important to remember. He grew hot and cold and knew his hands and voice shook, as he answered. But, perhaps--he felt desperately--signs of emotion were not bad.

"I am not quite equal to exertion," he began slowly. "But a man cannot lie on his bed while some things are undone--a MAN cannot."

As the old Duke sat upright, the blue eyes under his bent brows were startled, as well as curious. Was the man going out of his mind about something? He looked rather like it, with the dampness starting out on his haggard face, and the ugly look suddenly stamped there. The fact was that the insensate fury which had possessed and torn Anstruthers as he had writhed in his inn bedroom had sprung upon him again in full force, and his weakness could not control it, though it would have been wiser

to hold it in check. He also felt frightfully ill, which filled him with despair, and, through this fact, he lost sight of the effect he produced, as he stood up, shaking all over.

"I come to you because you are the one man who can most easily understand the thing I have been concealing for a good many years."

The Duke was irritated. Confound the objectionable idiot, what did he mean by taking that intimate tone with a man who was not prepared to concern himself in his affairs?

"Excuse me," he said, holding up an authoritative hand, "are you going to make a confession? I don't like such things. I prefer to be excused. Personal confidences are not parochial matters."

"This one is." And Sir Nigel was sickeningly conscious that he was putting the statement rashly, while at the same time all better words escaped him. "It is as much a parochial matter," losing all hold on his wits and stammering, "as was--as was--the affair of--your wife."

It was the Duke who stood up now, scarlet with anger. He sprang from his chair as if he had been a young man in whom some insult had struck blazing fire.

"You--you dare!" he shouted. "You insolent blackguard! You force your way in here and dare--dare----!" And he clenched his fist, wildly

shaking it.

Nigel Anstruthers, staggering on his uncertain feet, would have shouted also, but could not, though he tried, and he heard his own voice come forth brokenly.

"Yes, I dare! I--your--my own--my----!"

Swaying and tottering, he swung round to the chair he had left, and fell into it, even while the old Duke, who stood raging before him, started back in outraged amazement. What was the fellow doing? Was he making faces at him? The drawn malignant mouth and muscles suggested it. Was he a lunatic, indeed? But the sense of disgusted outrage changed all at once to horror, as, with a countenance still more hideously livid and twisted, his visitor slid helplessly from his seat and lay a huddling heap of clothes on the floor.