

KERSHAM MANOR.

CHAPTER XXV.

A DIVIDED HOUSE.

Esther had looked forward with some dread to her first evening under Sebastian's roof, but she need not have been afraid. Most of the English colony had left in search of greater coolness, and of the three gentlemen present only one was an Englishman. There was an Italian count and a French officer and his wife. The Englishman seemed also to be a military man. He was addressed as Major Knyvett, and treated with great distinction by his hostess. She was happy in her own companion, M. de Cazolotte, the French officer, but she was not so much absorbed in conversation as to be blind to what went on elsewhere.

"Thank heaven it's all over!" said Nina, falling back into the depths of a great easy-chair when Sebastian had gone out to hand Madame de Cazolotte into the carriage.

"How tiresome people are! What are you looking at, Esther?"

"I never saw anything so beautiful as the moon-light," said Esther. She was standing at a window, gazing out upon the orange and olive groves, the distant hills, and the silent sea, all bathed in a glorious flood of silver light. Thus standing, a curtain partly hid her from view, and Sebastian did not see her when he re-entered the room.

He stood for a moment looking at his wife, and then said gravely:

"I thought you understood, Nina, that I did not want you to ask Major Knyvett here."

"I can't prevent his calling," said Nina carelessly. "And when he was in the room just before the dinner-hour, I was obliged to ask him."

"I would rather that you did not ask him again."

"He is a very amusing man. I like him."

"Don't say so in public," Sebastian replied dryly. "He bears a bad character."

"That has nothing to do with me. You are responsible for his coming to the house first of all. I am not going to be unkind to him," said Nina, in a determined voice.

"I have asked him to tea next Wednesday."

"You need not have done that: you knew that I did not wish it."

"Yes, I knew. But you are so unreasonable in your likes and dislikes that I did not care," said Nina coolly. "There, don't look so dreadfully cross, or Esther will think you a perfect ogre. Esther! come in, dear, he has done scolding now."

"It is so stupid of him to object to Major Knyvett," said Nina, yawning when he had gone. "He is a much more amusing companion than Sebastian. Come, Esther, dear, I am sure you must be tired. We will have a long, long talk in the morning."

Esther was to be downstairs at nine o'clock, and a dainty little repast was served by picturesquely dressed Arab servants to herself and to Nina, in a cool and spacious room already shuttered to keep out the sun.

"Where is Mr. Malet?" she asked.

"Oh, he had breakfast at six or seven, or some unearthly hour, and went into the town. He will not be back till the afternoon. He is often out all day."

"I'm awfully lonely, and I have nothing to do." This was the burden of Nina's lamentation. "One can not always be fussing over the children. It was not quite so bad in the winter when a good many people came, but now that they are going away, I assure you, Esther, that it is perfectly ghastly! It is so unkind of Sebastian not to come home with me this summer; he might have come if he had liked; instead of which he kept me here in the heat until now, and said that he would not allow me to go home unless somebody whom he could trust went with me. Of course I did not tell mamma that. Unless I went with the Goldneys, he said, and I hate and detest the Goldneys! Mrs. Goldney has been here all the winter, and she takes upon herself to lecture me about all sorts of things—my husband and the children, and my dress, and my acquaintances! I told Sebastian that I would have no more of her impertinence; and when she called last I sent out word that I was not a casa, and I was sitting in the window just where she could see me! She is a very consequential personage, and thinks it a great honor for her to call on me, because she is Lord Ripington's sister; and so she went away desperately offended, and of course it was impossible, after that, for me to travel home with her. I was very glad of it, but Sebastian was angry; he always rather liked Mrs. Goldney, and would not take my part a bit. All the English people here were talking about it—some were on her side and some on mine; it made quite a sensation!"

Nina smiled complacently at the remembrance.

"One needs something to stir one up in this dead-alive old place," she went on. "You can't be always thinking of the sky and the sea, and Moorish architecture, if you live here, you know. Those things are all very well as amusements, but one wants occupation for one's mind too; don't you think so?"

"Yes," said Esther, rather amused by the question. "And what occupation do you find?"

"There's just the difficulty. There are so few people that one cares to know, and without society how can you have occupation? By occupation," she said, "I mean social intercourse. I think the study of our fellow-creatures is the most improving of any, don't you? And what opportunity has one for studying them when they are for the most part either intelligent tourists or broken-down invalids? And I don't care to study my black and brown fellow-creatures; indeed Sebastian tells me it would not be at all improving."

"You have developed since the Kersham days, Nina. You never thought of studying your fellow-creatures then!"

"Oh yes, I did," said Nina. "Only country people are all exactly alike, don't you think? Except mamma—she was different: she was quite a study. But it was very amusing to look out for the people's little weaknesses and vanities. I go to tennis-parties for that reason more than for any other; and people say that I am so satirical! Madame La Houpe is always bringing up people to me as fresh types of character, you know. It was she who introduced Mayor Knyvett, whom Sebastian dislikes so much. But as I say to him, why should I not know a fresh type, when one comes in my way?"

"Don't you think that you are rather too young and too—too—pretty, to lay your-

self out in that way for the study of new types?"

"Now, Esther don't be prudish. You know I have seen a great deal more of the world than you have, although I am younger than you. I am a married woman," said Nina, with importance, "and a married woman may do anything."

"Are there many parties, then, in the winter?" Esther asked presently.

"Dozens. People have breakfast parties, and picnics, and excursions, as well as the ordinary afternoon teas and dinners, you see. Of course we are asked everywhere; we go to the best people," said Nina once more. "I have known myself to have twenty-three engagements in one week!"

"I can only hope that you did not keep them all."

"Indeed I did; every one."

"And what does Mr. Malet do when you are out so much?"

"Sebastian!" exclaimed Nina, "why, good gracious, Esther, he goes too! You did not think that he would be left behind, did you?"

"I thought that perhaps he had work to do," said Esther meekly.

"He can always leave his work when he likes," said Nina, with a little sneer. "It is just official work, and his clerks can do it, I believe, as well as he can. Oh, Sebastian is very fond of society. Besides, he must always be where I am, you know. You need not think, because he looks so cross and so tiresome, that he is not as fond of me as ever. The fact is, he is always bothering me about not loving him so well as I used to do." And Nina shrugged her shoulders.

"And do you not?" said Esther, turning upon her suddenly.

"Oh, well, I don't know. Of course one can't continue to feel as one did on the wedding-day. And I think that Sebastian is rather tiresome—not nearly so nice as I used to think, before our marriage. You would not believe it, Esther, but he has turned out quite stingy."

"Oh, Nina."

"It is quite true. He is always talking about expense, and saying that he can not afford this and that. And now that that wicked old uncle of his has gone and got married," cried Nina, with vicious energy, "I suppose that he'll be worse than ever! For he won't have Kersham now. How I hate being poor."

"But you are not poor," said Esther slowly, looking round at the luxurious furnishings of the room in which she sat.

"Well, I suppose you would not think so," returned Nina, "but for us—in our position—we are poor."

Esther had some needlework in her hand. She seemed intent upon it, answered, "Perhaps so."

"There is no 'perhaps' about it," she insisted. "I know that we never have enough for our needs. We have been here a year and a half, and do you know why we left Vienna, where I enjoyed myself immensely! Simply because Sebastian declared that he could not afford to stay there any longer, I was so extravagant. I am sure that my poor little gowns and trifles did not cost one tenth of what other people in our position used to spend. There were the Shiplaks; I assure you Esther, that they had not a thousand a year, and they spent far more than we did! And you know that Sebastian had thirty thousand from his Uncle Roland; so it is ridiculous to say that we cannot afford things!"

"But you said just now that you were poor."

"He says we are poor, and I am bound to believe it," replied Nina bitterly. "I don't believe we spend half our income. What he does with his money I am sure I can't tell. I sometimes think—She stopped short, and the color came into her face. She did not tell Esther what she sometimes thought. "I wish I were at home again! I wish I were dead!" she broke out passionately, after a moment's pause.

"There are your children, Nina," said Esther in a low tone.

"Oh, the children! Everybody says 'There are the children,'" cried Nina. "The tiresome little brats!"

Esther bethought herself of Mrs. Malet's present "for the baby," and gave Nina an account of the interview. Nina laughed over it quite happily; her outbreak of strong feeling had been but for a moment. She accepted the envelope with great complacency, and smoothed out the bank note on her knee with a satisfied air.

"She's not a bad creature, after all. For the baby,—of course that was a mere pretext for sending the money to me. It will just do for—By-the-bye, Esther, be sure you don't mention it to Sebastian."

Esther looked up. "I am not likely to speak of it; but why?"

"Can't you guess why, you dear stupid old thing?" laughed Nina. "A debt of course. A bric-a-brac man down in the town. He has been dunning me dreadfully of late; and I daren't—I simply dare not—tell Sebastian. This will stop his mouth."

Three or four weeks were to elapse before Nina and the children set out for England. During this time Esther had little to do save to act as Nina's companion, and it was natural that she should watch what went on before her with the unimpassioned interest of a spectator at the play. The drama was not a satisfactory one. Nina's part in it was problematic; to Esther it seemed as if Sebastian's role were more tragic than he knew.

Esther's presence recalled old times to Sebastian's mind with a vividness which surprised himself. It brought back the old associations, with which she seemed to accord so wonderfully well. He had grown skeptical of late as to woman's sincerity, woman's faithfulness, yet he felt quite sure that sincerity and faithfulness were two of Esther's distinguishing traits. He could not pretend to disbelieve in them when she was near, though he did say to himself that she was "an exception." There was something in this "exceptional" nature of hers that always urged him on to confidences.

A few evenings only before the day on which Esther and Nina were to start with the children for England, Sebastian stepped out upon the veranda and found Esther seated there alone.

"Nina is not here?" he said, with an accent of surprise.

"No, Madame La Roche called directly after dinner, and they are in the little salon together. Did you want Nina?"

"Oh, no; I only wondered that she was not here. Do you object to my cigarette?"

Esther liked it rather than otherwise, and Sebastian sat down near her in a deep low wicker chair, and kept silence for a time. Presently he said:

"So you go on Thursday and leave me to my loneliness?"

"Yes. But you have many friends. You will not be very lonely."

"Perhaps not. And what do you think of us all, Esther? What about Africa's 'golden joys'? I am afraid we have not done much for your enjoyment."

"I did not come for enjoyment," said Esther, "I wanted to be useful."

"You have been very useful, and we are grateful," Sebastian answered. "Indeed I do not know how to be grateful enough. I could not send my wife home alone; and I know that you will take care of her."

"I will try to take care of her."

"I shall feel quite safe when she is with you," said Sebastian. "She has been quieter, happier, ever since you came. I wish," he went on meditatively, "that she liked this life better. Will you try to persuade her, Esther, that at any rate it might be worse?" Of course, a European capital is more to her taste; but we have an exquisite climate, beautiful scenery, pleasant enough society—I think she will grow reconciled to it in time."

"You did not like Vienna? I heard that you gave it up," said Esther.

"Oh yes, I liked it well enough. Nina liked it too. She did not tell you why we left, then?"

"No."

"We began on too large a scale," said Sebastian, trying to speak lightly, but not succeeding. "We were there for a year and a half, and did our best to ruin ourselves. We were absurdly extravagant. Our income is far less now than it ought to be. I had to draw upon my capital."

"Does Nina understand that?"

"I have tried to explain it, but she does not seem to listen. I thought, Esther, that you—as an old friend—might tell her how matters stand. I think she would listen to you. She does not comprehend: I believe that she fancies that I am romancing when I try to explain business affairs to her. She is so young—so delicate and childlike still, you see."

"Yes, I see."

"She might listen to another woman," said Sebastian wistfully. "The fact is—there were one or two little extravagances of hers, and I was hard upon her—I suppose that I was harsh, and I spoke too strongly. She nearly broke her heart over it, poor child." He spoke between long pauses, as if recalling foregone scenes. "I told her afterwards that I was sorry; but she has been afraid of me ever since. . . . she does not understand that I am bound by a private letter from my Uncle Roland to reserve part of the money that he left to me untouched, in case a relation of mine should turn up. If the man does not reappear shortly, I think that I shall be justified in appropriating part of the sum to my own uses. I have made it a point of honor hitherto not to touch even the interest of that money."

"Nina ought to understand that."

"Yes. She ought to have known from the beginning. You see," said Sebastian, "I had a difficulty in telling her, because I fancied that she would not sympathize—and so I shirked the subject until, now, it has become a painful one. My income was from the first just about half what she had supposed it to be."

"Was that fair to her?" said Esther gently.

"No, it was not." He looked very gloomy. "I was a fool. But you know—or perhaps you don't know—and he tried to smile—"that wives are often in ignorance of their husbands' exact incomes."

"Yes, but every one knew of Sir Roland's will," said Esther.

"I did the thing too much by halves, I know," he continued. "I ought to have made her understand from the beginning what we had and what we had not. However, we are not in embarrassed circumstances—you need not begin to think that!—we have retrieved ourselves, but—I have sacrificed my career to do it."

"What do you mean?"

"A consularship in a little Mediterranean port is not much. I offended several of my friends by taking it. I should have stayed where I was if I had wanted to get on. I have been shelved. I suppose that I may stay here all my life now, if I like."

"I almost wonder—"

"That I accepted it. I see that it was a mistake. I did not see it then. And I was desperate to get away from Vienna. There was nothing but ruin before me if I stayed."

"It is not exactly what Uncle Roland wished, is it?" he said with a bitter smile.

"He did not foresee this turn of events. But I think I could guess what he would say."

"Well? You ought to know his mind as well as any one, Esther; you saw him so often during those last two years. I think I shall take what you say as if it came from his lips."

"Oh no, you must not do that. I may be mistaken, I may be presumptuous. But I think he would tell you that there were many ways in which a man might distinguish himself, and that because a man has failed in one path it is not necessary that he should despair and do nothing for the rest of his life."

"You have noticed that I do nothing?" said Sebastian. "You are right I have done nothing at all since I came here—eighteen months ago. Official routine, of course. Cards and billiards and a little sport, and my wife's parties. And how I have hated it all!"

He got up and moved restlessly to and fro in the shadow of the house.

"And you have been disappointed in me, Esther?" he said gently.

"I have only thought sometimes," she said, "of what Sir Roland wanted you to be."

"I shall never be that. But it is perhaps not too late to do something—to be something—still. You shall hear better things of me yet. What a power you have—do you know it?—of stirring one's ambitions, Esther. What a help you would be—will be—"

her cheeks. She was too miserable to wipe them away.

"I did not know," she was saying to herself; "I would not have come if I had known. I thought I had forgotten. But there are some things one can never forget; and I—God forgive me—I love Sebastian still."

CHAPTER XXVI.

ON THE BRINK.

As the last three days of Esther's sojourn at the villa passed by, she became more and more concerned about Nina. A little incident opened Esther's eyes. As she stood by the window reading a book which was hanging loose, she was struck by the sound of voices in the next room—the large drawing-room. There was a man's voice, then Nina's; she was sure, too, that she heard a sob. Had Nina turned hysterical at the thought of leaving her husband so soon?

Without waiting to consider the wisdom of the proceeding, she walked swiftly to the drawing-room door, with the intention of consoling and calming her friend.

Nina was standing with one hand on the back of a chair, the other pressed a handkerchief to her eyes; she was sobbing quietly but unrestrainedly. Beside her, bending over her in a protecting manner, stood Major Knyvett, with one hand on the pretty wrist poised on the chair, his face lowered until his mouth seemed almost to touch her ear. Esther caught his last words.

"You shall be convinced, when you meet me to-night. I—"

Then he saw Esther, and drew himself up, altering his position so as to put some paces of distance between himself and Mrs. Malet. Nina did not look round.

"What is the matter, dear?" she said, in her calm, sweet tones.

Major Knyvett directed a glance of alarm toward Nina, but stood his ground. Fortunately an opening door, the rustle of silken skirts in the next room, and the appearance of a white-robed, brown-faced domestic at the door, put an end to the awkward situation.

"Mrs. Russell, mem."

Major Knyvett turned and fled by the veranda; Nina vanished by a side-door into the hall, and Esther was left to meet and greet the English visitor.

She did not see Nina again till dinner-time. Mrs. Malet came down to dinner as usual, in a gay dinner dress, with jewels on her arms and neck, and flowers in her hair; but she would not meet Esther's eye, and she ate nothing, though she drank more than one glass of wine and talked with feverish volubility.

Sebastian accompanied the ladies to the drawing-room. He said he wanted to be with them as long as possible, and spoke half regretfully of his decision against going to England that summer. "But perhaps I shall run over after all. You need not be surprised to see me at Kersham, Nina."

Nina smiled vaguely, but made no reply.

"And tell them," said Sebastian, "I must be as busy as I can—I am going to look over my uncle's papers and to set to work on them while you are away."

"My head aches," said Nina, rising abruptly. "You won't mind if I leave you for a little time? I will get some eau de Cologne and lie down; if I feel better in half an hour I will come back. Don't let me be disturbed, please."

She slipped away, not glancing at Esther. Sebastian seemed disappointed at her departure; but he said very little, and finally sat down to read, while Esther occupied her hands with needlework.

But Esther could not sew; could not answer when Sebastian addressed an occasional remark to her. She was listening intently; she knew not for what. She thought at last that she heard a footfall on the veranda, the closing of a distant door. Without saying a word she suddenly rose and slipped out of the room. The outer doors stood open. She crossed the veranda, descended the steps, and turned into the garden. At the garden-gate she came face to face with Nina.

"What are you spying on me for?" she cried out in a high, shrill voice. "I will not be followed; I will not be interfered with! Twice in one day! You are not paid to do this sort of work! Go back to the house!"

"I will go when you come with me," she said firmly. "Nina, come back with me. It is not safe to be out so late. You will be ill."

"Take your hand away," said Nina, "I want a little fresh air, I want to be alone. I should be glad if you would leave me for a little time."

"I want a little fresh air, too; I will walk with you," said Esther, "I want to talk to you—"

Nina's look was haughty; her face still aflame. "Upon my word!" she exclaimed, "I never heard anything of the kind! Do you mean to force your company on me whether I will or no? Well, mamma was right; she always said that you did not know your place."

"It is useless to try to insult me, Nina," said Esther, "I do not follow you out of mere curiosity; I will go back if you can tell me that you are here only for the evening coolness—that you are not expecting any one to meet you—"

"Why should I expect any one to meet me? I am alone—as you see. That is enough."

"Nina, tell me that you are not expecting to meet—Major Knyvett!"

"And if I were," Nina cried vehemently, "what is that to you?"

"It is a great deal to me," said Esther, "because I love you and have loved you, Nina, for so many years. How can it be nothing to me if I see you sinking into a terrible abyss? Nina, think of your husband; think of your little children, and come back with me! Don't meet that man!"

"My husband does not care for me," she said.

"You are wrong, and you know that you are wrong," Esther answered vehemently. "He loves you with his whole heart; he grieves when you are cold to him, his mind is bent on pleasing you. I have watched; I have seen it with my own eyes. He cares for nobody but you; you are the whole world to him, and if you refuse to see it and try and break his heart—"

"It would not break his heart," said Nina. "Even if I left him he would not care."

"If you left him—for another—I think that it would kill him with shame," said Esther, almost in a whisper.

"I did not say that it would be with another," said Nina in a lowered tone.

"No, I know you did not. You do not mean it—you were speaking only in a jest. But, dearest Nina—"

"I did mean it; I was not in jest," said Nina. "Sebastian does not love me—there is one who does—he has promised to make me happy—to give me everything I want, if only I will go with him."

"But you, Nina—you said—no?" Esther asked at length in a voice that was not her own.

"I said—what does it matter to you what I said, I will give my answer to him myself."

"It is he whom you came to meet? Oh, Nina, think a little—stop before you go too far, dear. I am sure you mean to do right, you do not mean to leave your husband, your poor little children, your mother, and all who love you?—because, you know, you would then set up a barrier between them and yourself that nothing could break down—you would never be able to see them again, to look at your children's innocent faces, Nina, or to feel your mother's kiss! What would you do?—I might be your friend: I would love you still; but what could I do for you? No, Nina, no," cried Esther in an agony of passionate entreaty, "for your husband's sake, dear Nina, you shall not go!"

"You do not understand," said Nina, who was now trembling and very pale. "I did not say that I was going now—how could I be going anywhere, Esther, in this dress? How absurd you are!"—She burst into a quivering laugh that showed the tense condition of her nerves. "I did not mean to go farther than the orange grove—just yet. I did not say whether I had answered yes or no."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

THOUGHT HE WAS CRAZY.

Indians Take a Scientist for a Crank and Saved His Life—They Killed General Custer Though.

"One very peculiar characteristic of the Indian," says Major Barbour, a former plainsman "is his reverence, amounting to absolute fear in many instances, of an insane person. They never harm one whom they believe to be mentally afflicted. I remember one striking instance which will illustrate. I was a member of the expedition headed by Gen. Custer that made a tour through the Yellowstone Valley and that section of the country the year before the Custer massacre. It was put on foot in the interest of science, and we had a lot of fellows from the Smithsonian Institute and about a dozen Yale professors.

"It was a big party, comprising two or three companies of cavalry, one of infantry and some artillery, so the Sioux, who at that time simply swarmed over that country, were afraid to tackle us. But they hung around us all the time, and Gen. Custer gave orders, after two men who were hunting had been killed, that no one should leave camp without permission.

"Those Yale professors just worried the life out of the soldiers. Every professor had a detail of five men who had to watch him. They would go around picking up bugs and chasing butterflies all over the prairie, and would break up rocks and powder over them with magnifying glasses until the soldiers swore that every man of them was a howling idiot."

"One day the worst old fellow in the crowd, who wore two pairs of glasses, one red and one green, managed in some way or other to get out of the sight of his detail and wandered two or three miles away. He ran plump into a gang of Sioux. He walked up to them and offered to shake hands. They grabbed him, and the first thing they did was to dive down into a big green baize bag he carried. They pulled out lizards and pieces of clay and bits of rock and bugs and the worst assortment of truck imaginable. Just about this time the old professor caught sight of a peculiar-looking bug. He caught it, pulled out his glass, and began to study it. That settled it. An Indian took him by the hand, led him to a hill close by, and, pointing to the army below, said, 'Go.'"

"He came back and said that the soldiers totally misunderstood the Indians. 'Why, I found them the most polite and courteous of people,' said he to Gen. Custer. But an old chief afterward told me that they wouldn't have had him stay in that country for anything on earth."

FACTS IN FEW WORDS.

A thimble will hold over 100,000 of the smallest screws made.

The indirect losses on buildings and enterprises of the world's fair is estimated at \$10,000,000.

When a resident of the arctic region takes a night off in winter he is away for about twenty-one weeks.

At Great Falls, Mont., the mercury has been known to drop twenty-five degrees inside of five minutes.

In the year 760 A. D. Pope Paul I. sent the only clock in the known world as a present to Pepin, king of France.

Some of the fish in the royal aquarium in St. Petersburg have been on exhibition for more than 150 years.

The Bibliotheque National of Paris, containing 1,400,000 volumes, is reputed to be the largest library in the world.

Cotton has been cultivated since time out of memory. One of the presents received by Jacob, Joseph's father, from the royal hand of Pharaoh was a "cotton rope."

The Japanese believe that their emperors are descendants from the gods, the present mikado being the 121st in direct line from the heavenly being.

The meanest man yet was an Ohio youth who got married and left an envelope containing a 2-cent ferry ticket in the parson's hand.

There are entire apartment houses in New York monopolized by self-supporting bachelor girls, and they are the happiest of their sex.

On some parts of the coast of France when the wind is east the mist that appears bears with it a very noticeable perfume.

Arrest before trial was not customary in Athens, and a citizen would generally escape a trial by going into voluntary exile.

It is computed that the number of people who die in London every year would fill a cemetery twenty-three acres in extent.

In India among the natives one woman in five is a widow.

The Empress of Austria has a lady doctor in her suite.