CHAPTER II

A LACK OF PERCEPTION

Mercantile as Americans were proclaimed to be, the opinion of Sir Nigel Anstruthers was that they were, on some points, singularly unbusinesslike. In the perfectly obvious and simple matter of the settlement of his daughter's fortune, he had felt that Reuben Vanderpoel was obtuse to the point of idiocy. He seemed to have none of the ordinary points of view. Naturally there was to Anstruthers' mind but one point of view to take. A man of birth and rank, he argued, does not career across the Atlantic to marry a New York millionaire's daughter unless he anticipates deriving some advantage from the alliance. Such a man--being of Anstruthers' type--would not have married a rich woman even in his own country with out making sure that advantages were to accrue to himself as a result of the union. "In England," to use his own words, "there was no nonsense about it." Women's fortunes as well as themselves belonged to their husbands, and a man who was master in his own house could make his wife do as he chose. He had seen girls with money managed very satisfactorily by fellows who held a tight rein, and were not moved by tears, and did not allow talking to relations. If he had been desirous of marrying and could have afforded to take a penniless wife, there were hundreds of portionless girls ready to thank God for a decent chance to settle themselves for life, and one need not stir out of one's native land to find them.

But Sir Nigel had not in the least desired to saddle himself with a domestic encumbrance, in fact nothing would have induced him to consider the step if he had not been driven hard by circumstances. His fortunes had reached a stage where money must be forthcoming somehow--from somewhere. He and his mother had been living from hand to mouth, so to speak, for years, and they had also been obliged to keep up appearances, which is sometimes embittering even to persons of amiable tempers. Lady Anstruthers, it is true, had lived in the country in as niggardly a manner as possible. She had narrowed her existence to absolute privation, presenting at the same time a stern, bold front to the persons who saw her, to the insufficient staff of servants, to the village to the vicar and his wife, and the few far-distant neighbours who perhaps once a year drove miles to call or leave a card. She was an old woman sufficiently unattractive to find no difficulty in the way of limiting her acquaintances. The unprepossessing wardrobe she had gathered in the passing years was remade again and again by the village dressmaker. She wore dingy old silk gowns and appalling bonnets, and mantles dripping with rusty fringes and bugle beads, but these mitigated not in the least the unflinching arrogance of her bearing, or the simple, intolerant rudeness which she considered proper and becoming in persons like herself. She did not of course allow that there existed many persons like herself.

That society rejoiced in this fact was but the stamp of its inferiority and folly. While she pinched herself and harried her few hirelings at Stornham it was necessary for Sir Nigel to show himself in town and

present as decent an appearance as possible. His vanity was far too arrogant to allow of his permitting himself to drop out of the world to which he could not afford to belong. That he should have been forgotten or ignored would have been intolerable to him. For a few years he was invited to dine at good houses, and got shooting and hunting as part of the hospitality of his acquaintances. But a man who cannot afford to return hospitalities will find that he need not expect to avail himself of those of his acquaintances to the end of his career unless he is an extremely engaging person. Sir Nigel Anstruthers was not an engaging person. He never gave a thought to the comfort or interest of any other human being than himself. He was also dominated by the kind of nasty temper which so reveals itself when let loose that its owner cannot control it even when it would be distinctly to his advantage to do so.

Finding that he had nothing to give in return for what he took as if it were his right, society gradually began to cease to retain any lively recollection of his existence. The tradespeople he had borne himself loftily towards awakened to the fact that he was the kind of man it was at once safe and wise to dun, and therefore proceeded to make his life a burden to him. At his clubs he had never been a member surrounded and rejoiced over when he made his appearance. The time came when he began to fancy that he was rather edged away from, and he endeavoured to sustain his dignity by being sulky and making caustic speeches when he was approached. Driven occasionally down to Stornham by actual pressure of circumstances, he found the outlook there more embittering still.

Lady Anstruthers laid the bareness of the land before him without any effort to palliate unpleasantness. If he chose to stalk about and look glum, she could sit still and call his attention to revolting truths which he could not deny. She could point out to him that he had no money, and that tenants would not stay in houses which were tumbling to pieces, and work land which had been starved. She could tell him just how long a time had elapsed since wages had been paid and accounts cleared off. And she had an engaging, unbiassed way of seeming to drive these maddening details home by the mere manner of her statement.

"You make the whole thing as damned disagreeable as you can," Nigel would snarl.

"I merely state facts," she would reply with acrid serenity.

A man who cannot keep up his estate, pay his tailor or the rent of his lodgings in town, is in a strait which may drive him to desperation.
Sir Nigel Anstruthers borrowed some money, went to New York and made his
suit to nice little silly Rosalie Vanderpoel.

But the whole thing was unexpectedly disappointing and surrounded by irritating circumstances. He found himself face to face with a state of affairs such as he had not contemplated. In England when a man married, certain practical matters could be inquired into and arranged by solicitors, the amount of the prospective bride's fortune, the

allowances and settlements to be made, the position of the bridegroom with regard to pecuniary matters. To put it simply, a man found out where he stood and what he was to gain. But, at first to his sardonic entertainment and later to his disgusted annoyance, Sir Nigel gradually discovered that in the matter of marriage, Americans had an ingenuous tendency to believe in the sentimental feelings of the parties concerned. The general impression seemed to be that a man married purely for love, and that delicacy would make it impossible for him to ask questions as to what his bride's parents were in a position to hand over to him as a sort of indemnity for the loss of his bachelor freedom. Anstruthers began to discover this fact before he had been many weeks in New York. He reached the realisation of its existence by processes of exclusion and inclusion, by hearing casual remarks people let drop, by asking roundabout and careful questions, by leading both men and women to the innocent expounding of certain points of view. Millionaires, it appeared, did not expect to make allowances to men who married their daughters; young women, it transpired, did not in the least realise that a man should be liberally endowed in payment for assuming the duties of a husband. If rich fathers made allowances, they made them to their daughters themselves, who disposed of them as they pleased. In this case, of course, Sir Nigel privately argued with fine acumen, it became the husband's business to see that what his wife pleased should be what most agreeably coincided with his own views and conveniences.

His most illuminating experience had been the hearing of some men, hard-headed, rich stockbrokers with a vulgar sense of humour, enjoying

themselves quite uproariously one night at a club, over a story one of them was relating of an unsatisfactory German son-in-law who had demanded an income. He was a man of small title, who had married the narrator's daughter, and after some months spent in his father-in-law's house, had felt it but proper that his financial position should be put on a practical footing.

"He brought her back after the bridal tour to make us a visit," said the storyteller, a sharp-featured man with a quaint wry mouth, which seemed to express a perpetual, repressed appreciation of passing events. "I had nothing to say against that, because we were all glad to see her home and her mother had been missing her. But weeks passed and months passed
and there was no mention made of them going over to settle in the Slosh we'd heard so much of, and in time it came out that the Slosh thing"--Anstruthers realised with gall in his soul that the "brute," as he called him, meant "Schloss," and that his mispronunciation was at once a matter of humour and derision--"wasn't his at all. It was his elder brother's. The whole lot of them were counts and not one of them seemed to own a dime. The Slosh count hadn't more than twenty-five cents and he wasn't the kind to deal any of it out to his family. So Lily's count would have to go clerking in a dry goods store, if he promised to support himself. But he didn't propose to do it. He thought he'd got on to a soft thing. Of course we're an easy-going lot and we should have stood him if he'd been a nice fellow. But he wasn't. Lily's mother used to find her crying in her bedroom and it came out by degrees that it was

because Adolf had been quarrelling with her and saying sneering things about her family. When her mother talked to him he was insulting. Then bills began to come in and Lily was expected to get me to pay them. And they were not the kind of bills a decent fellow calls on another man to pay. But I did it five or six times to make it easy for her. I didn't tell her that they gave an older chap than himself sidelights on the situation. But that didn't work well. He thought I did it because I had to, and he began to feel free and easy about it, and didn't try to cover up his tracks so much when he sent in a new lot. He was always working Lily. He began to consider himself master of the house. He intimated that a private carriage ought to be kept for them. He said it was beggarly that he should have to consider the rest of the family when he wanted to go out. When I got on to the situation, I began to enjoy it. I let him spread himself for a while just to see what he would do. Good Lord! I couldn't have believed that any fellow could have thought any other fellow could be such a fool as he thought I was. He went perfectly crazy after a month or so and ordered me about and patronised me as if I was a bootblack he meant to teach something to. So at last I had a talk with Lily and told her I was going to put an end to it. Of course she cried and was half frightened to death, but by that time he had ill-used her so that she only wanted to get rid of him. So I sent for him and had a talk with him in my office. I led him on to saying all he had on his mind. He explained to me what a condescension it was for a man like himself to marry a girl like Lily. He made a dignified, touching picture of all the disadvantages of such an alliance and all the advantages they ought to bring in exchange to the man who bore up under them. I rubbed

my head and looked worried every now and then and cleared my throat apologetically just to warm him up. I can tell you that fellow felt happy, downright happy when he saw how humbly I listened to him. He positively swelled up with hope and comfort. He thought I was going to turn out well, real well. I was going to pay up just as a vulgar New York father-in-law ought to do, and thank God for the blessed privilege. Why, he was real eloquent about his blood and his ancestors and the hoary-headed Slosh. So when he'd finished, I cleared my throat in a nervous, ingratiating kind of way again and I asked him kind of anxiously what he thought would be the proper thing for a base-born New York millionaire to do under the circumstances--what he would approve of himself."

Sir Nigel was disgusted to see the narrator twist his mouth into a sweet, shrewd, repressed grin even as he expectorated into the nearest receptacle. The grin was greeted by a shout of laughter from his companions.

"What did he say, Stebbins?" someone cried.

"He said," explained Mr. Stebbins deliberately, "he said that an allowance was the proper thing. He said that a man of his rank must have resources, and that it wasn't dignified for him to have to ask his wife or his wife's father for money when he wanted it. He said an allowance was what he felt he had a right to expect. And then he twisted his moustache and said, 'what proposition' did I make--what would I allow

him?"

The storyteller's hearers evidently knew him well. Their laughter was louder than before.

"Let's hear the rest, Joe! Let's hear it!"

"Well," replied Mr. Stebbins almost thoughtfully, "I just got up and said, 'Well, it won't take long for me to answer that. I've always been fond of my children, and Lily is rather my pet. She's always had everything she wanted, and she always shall. She's a good girl and she deserves it. I'll allow you----" The significant deliberation of his drawl could scarcely be described. "I'll allow you just five minutes to get out of this room, before I kick you out, and if I kick you out of the room, I'll kick you down the stairs, and if I kick you down the stairs, I shall have got my blood comfortably warmed up and I'll kick you down the street and round the block and down to Hoboken, because you're going to take the steamer there and go back to the place you came from, to the Slosh thing or whatever you call it. We haven't a damned bit of use for you here.' And believe it or not, gentlemen----" looking round with the wry-mouthed smile, "he took that passage and back he went. And Lily's living with her mother and I mean to hold on to her."

Sir Nigel got up and left the club when the story was finished. He took a long walk down Broadway, gnawing his lip and holding his head in the air. He used blasphemous language at intervals in a low voice. Some of

it was addressed to his fate and some of it to the vulgar mercantile coarseness and obtuseness of other people.

"They don't know what they are talking of," he said. "It is unheard of. What do they expect? I never thought of this. Damn it! I'm like a rat in a trap."

It was plain enough that he could not arrange his fortune as he had anticipated when he decided to begin to make love to little pink and white, doll-faced Rosy Vanderpoel. If he began to demand monetary advantages in his dealing with his future wife's people in their settlement of her fortune, he might arouse suspicion and inquiry. He did not want inquiry either in connection with his own means or his past manner of living. People who hated him would be sure to crop up with stories of things better left alone. There were always meddling fools ready to interfere.

His walk was long and full of savage thinking. Once or twice as he realised what the disinterestedness of his sentiments was supposed to be, a short laugh broke from him which was rather like the snort of the Bishopess.

"I am supposed to be moonstruck over a simpering American chit--moonstruck! Damn!" But when he returned to his hotel he had made up his mind and was beginning to look over the situation in evil cold blood. Matters must be settled without delay and he was shrewd enough to

realise that with his temper and its varied resources a timid girl would not be difficult to manage. He had seen at an early stage of their acquaintance that Rosy was greatly impressed by the superiority of his bearing, that he could make her blush with embarrassment when he conveyed to her that she had made a mistake, that he could chill her miserably when he chose to assume a lofty stiffness. A man's domestic armoury was filled with weapons if he could make a woman feel gauche, inexperienced, in the wrong. When he was safely married, he could pave the way to what he felt was the only practical and feasible end.

If he had been marrying a woman with more brains, she would be more difficult to subdue, but with Rosalie Vanderpoel, processes were not necessary. If you shocked, bewildered or frightened her with accusations, sulks, or sneers, her light, innocent head was set in such a whirl that the rest was easy. It was possible, upon the whole, that the thing might not turn out so infernally ill after all. Supposing that it had been Bettina who had been the marriageable one! Appreciating to the full the many reasons for rejoicing that she had not been, he walked in gloomy reflection home.