

CHAPTER VI

AN UNFAIR ENDOWMENT

To Bettina Vanderpoel had been given, to an extraordinary extent, the extraordinary thing which is called beauty--which is a thing entirely set apart from mere good looks or prettiness. This thing is extraordinary because, if statistics were taken, the result would probably be the discovery that not three human beings in a million really possess it. That it should be bestowed at all--since it is so rare--seems as unfair a thing as appears to the mere mortal mind the bestowal of unbounded wealth, since it quite as inevitably places the life of its owner upon an abnormal plane. There are millions of pretty women, and billions of personable men, but the man or woman of entire physical beauty may cross one's pathway only once in a lifetime--or not at all. In the latter case it is natural to doubt the absolute truth of the rumours that the thing exists. The abnormal creature seems a mere freak of nature and may chance to be angel, criminal, total insipidity, virago or enchanter, but let such an one enter a room or appear in the street, and heads must turn, eyes light and follow, souls yearn or envy, or sink under the discouragement of comparison. With the complete harmony and perfect balance of the singular thing, it would be folly for the rest of the world to compete. A human being who had lived in poverty for half a lifetime, might, if suddenly endowed with limitless fortune, retain, to a certain extent, balance of mind; but the same creature having lived the same number of years a wholly unlovely thing, suddenly

awakening to the possession of entire physical beauty, might find the strain upon pure sanity greater and the balance less easy to preserve. The relief from the conscious or unconscious tension bred by the sense of imperfection, the calm surety of the fearlessness of meeting in any eye a look not lighted by pleasure, would be less normal than the knowledge that no wish need remain unfulfilled, no fancy ungratified. Even at sixteen Betty was a long-limbed young nymph whose small head, set high on a fine slim column of throat, might well have been crowned with the garland of some goddess of health and the joy of life. She was light and swift, and being a creature of long lines and tender curves, there was pleasure in the mere seeing her move. The cut of her spirited lip, and delicate nostril, made for a profile at which one turned to look more than once, despite one's self. Her hair was soft and black and repeated its colour in the extravagant lashes of her childhood, which made mysterious the changeful dense blue of her eyes. They were eyes with laughter in them and pride, and a suggestion of many deep things yet unstirred. She was rather unusually tall, and her body had the suppleness of a young bamboo. The deep corners of her red mouth curled generously, and the chin, melting into the fine line of the lovely throat, was at once strong and soft and lovely. She was a creature of harmony, warm richness of colour, and brilliantly alluring life.

When her school days were over she returned to New York and gave herself into her mother's hands. Her mother's kindness of heart and sweet-tempered lovingness were touching things to Bettina. In the midst of her millions Mrs. Vanderpoel was wholly unworldly. Bettina knew that

she felt a perpetual homesickness when she allowed herself to think of the daughter who seemed lost to her, and the girl's realisation of this caused her to wish to be especially affectionate and amenable. She was glad that she was tall and beautiful, not merely because such physical gifts added to the colour and agreeableness of life, but because hers gave comfort and happiness to her mother. To Mrs. Vanderpoel, to introduce to the world the loveliest debutante of many years was to be launched into a new future. To concern one's self about her exquisite wardrobe was to have an enlivening occupation. To see her surrounded, to watch eyes as they followed her, to hear her praised, was to feel something of the happiness she had known in those younger days when New

York had been less advanced in its news and methods, and slim little blonde Rosalie had come out in white tulle and waltzed like a fairy with a hundred partners.

"I wonder what Rosy looks like now," the poor woman said involuntarily one day. Bettina was not a fairy. When her mother uttered her exclamation Bettina was on the point of going out, and as she stood near her, wrapped in splendid furs, she had the air of a Russian princess.

"She could not have worn the things you do, Betty," said the affectionate maternal creature. "She was such a little, slight thing. But she was very pretty. I wonder if twelve years have changed her much?"

Betty turned towards her rather suddenly.

"Mother," she said, "sometime, before very long, I am going to see."

"To see!" exclaimed Mrs. Vanderpoel. "To see Rosy!"

"Yes," Betty answered. "I have a plan. I have never told you of it, but I have been thinking over it ever since I was fifteen years old."

She went to her mother and kissed her. She wore a becoming but resolute expression.

"We will not talk about it now," she said. "There are some things I must find out."

When she had left the room, which she did almost immediately, Mrs. Vanderpoel sat down and cried. She nearly always shed a few tears when anyone touched upon the subject of Rosy. On her desk were some photographs. One was of Rosy as a little girl with long hair, one was of Lady Anstruthers in her wedding dress, and one was of Sir Nigel.

"I never felt as if I quite liked him," she said, looking at this last, "but I suppose she does, or she would not be so happy that she could forget her mother and sister."

There was another picture she looked at. Rosalie had sent it with the letter she wrote to her father after he had forwarded the money she

asked for. It was a little study in water colours of the head of her boy. It was nothing but a head, the shoulders being fancifully draped, but the face was a peculiar one. It was over-mature, and unlovely, but for a mouth at once pathetic and sweet.

"He is not a pretty child," sighed Mrs. Vanderpoel. "I should have thought Rosy would have had pretty babies. Ughtred is more like his father than his mother."

She spoke to her husband later, of what Betty had said.

"What do you think she has in her mind, Reuben?" she asked.

"What Betty has in her mind is usually good sense," was his response.

"She will begin to talk to me about it presently. I shall not ask questions yet. She is probably thinking: things over."

She was, in truth, thinking things over, as she had been doing for some time. She had asked questions on several occasions of English people she had met abroad. But a schoolgirl cannot ask many questions, and though she had once met someone who knew Sir Nigel Anstruthers, it was a person who did not know him well, for the reason that she had not desired to increase her slight acquaintance. This lady was the aunt of one of Bettina's fellow pupils, and she was not aware of the girl's relationship to Sir Nigel. What Betty gathered was that her brother-in-law was regarded as a decidedly bad lot, that since his

marriage to some American girl he had seemed to have money which he spent in riotous living, and that the wife, who was said to be a silly creature, was kept in the country, either because her husband did not want her in London, or because she preferred to stay at Stornham. About the wife no one appeared to know anything, in fact.

"She is rather a fool, I believe, and Sir Nigel Anstruthers is the kind of man a simpleton would be obliged to submit to," Bettina had heard the lady say.

Her own reflections upon these comments had led her through various paths of thought. She could recall Rosalie's girlhood, and what she herself, as an unconsciously observing child, had known of her character. She remembered the simple impressionability of her mind. She had been the most amenable little creature in the world. Her yielding amiability could always be counted upon as a factor by the calculating; sweet-tempered to weakness, she could be beguiled or distressed into any course the desires of others dictated. An ill-tempered or self-pitying person could alter any line of conduct she herself wished to pursue.

"She was neither clever nor strong-minded," Betty said to herself. "A man like Sir Nigel Anstruthers could make what he chose of her. I wonder what he has done to her?"

Of one thing she thought she was sure. This was that Rosalie's aloofness from her family was the result of his design.

She comprehended, in her maturer years, the dislike of her childhood. She remembered a certain look in his face which she had detested. She had not known then that it was the look of a rather clever brute, who was malignant, but she knew now.

"He used to hate us all," she said to herself. "He did not mean to know us when he had taken Rosalie away, and he did not intend that she should know us."

She had heard rumours of cases somewhat parallel, cases in which girls' lives had become swamped in those of their husbands, and their husbands' families. And she had also heard unpleasant details of the means employed to reach the desired results. Annie Butterfield's husband had forbidden her to correspond with her American relatives. He had argued that such correspondence was disturbing to her mind, and to the domestic duties which should be every decent woman's religion. One of the occasions of his beating her had been in consequence of his finding her writing to her mother a letter blotted with tears. Husbands frequently objected to their wives' relatives, but there was a special order of European husband who opposed violently any intimacy with American relations on the practical ground that their views of a wife's position, with regard to her husband, were of a revolutionary nature.

Mrs. Vanderpoel had in her possession every letter Rosalie or her husband had ever written. Bettina asked to be allowed to read them, and

one morning seated herself in her own room before a blazing fire, with the collection on a table at her side. She read them in order. Nigel's began as they went on. They were all in one tone, formal, uninteresting, and requiring no answers. There was not a suggestion of human feeling in one of them.

"He wrote them," said Betty, "so that we could not say that he had never written."

Rosalie's first epistles were affectionate, but timid. At the outset she was evidently trying to conceal the fact that she was homesick. Gradually she became briefer and more constrained. In one she said pathetically, "I am such a bad letter writer. I always feel as if I want to tear up what I have written, because I never say half that is in my heart." Mrs. Vanderpoel had kissed that letter many a time. She was sure that a mark on the paper near this particular sentence was where a tear had fallen. Bettina was sure of this, too, and sat and looked at the fire for some time.

That night she went to a ball, and when she returned home, she persuaded her mother to go to bed.

"I want to have a talk with father," she exclaimed. "I am going to ask him something."

She went to the great man's private room, where he sat at work, even

after the hours when less seriously engaged people come home from balls. The room he sat in was one of the apartments newspapers had with much detail described. It was luxuriously comfortable, and its effect was sober and rich and fine.

When Bettina came in, Vanderpoel, looking up to smile at her in welcome, was struck by the fact that as a background to an entering figure of tall, splendid girlhood in a ball dress it was admirable, throwing up all its whiteness and grace and sweep of line. He was always glad to see Betty. The rich strength of the life radiating from her, the reality and glow of her were good for him and had the power of detaching him from work of which he was tired.

She smiled back at him, and, coming forward took her place in a big armchair close to him, her lace-frilled cloak slipping from her shoulders with a soft rustling sound which seemed to convey her intention to stay.

"Are you too busy to be interrupted?" she asked, her mellow voice caressing him. "I want to talk to you about something I am going to do." She put out her hand and laid it on his with a clinging firmness which meant strong feeling. "At least, I am going to do it if you will help me," she ended.

"What is it, Betty?" he inquired, his usual interest in her accentuated by her manner.

She laid her other hand on his and he clasped both with his own.

"When the Worthingtons sail for England next month," she explained, "I want to go with them. Mrs. Worthington is very kind and will be good enough to take care of me until I reach London."

Mr. Vanderpoel moved slightly in his chair. Then their eyes met comprehendingly. He saw what hers held.

"From there you are going to Stornham Court!" he exclaimed.

"To see Rosy," she answered, leaning a little forward. "To SEE her.

"You believe that what has happened has not been her fault?" he said. There was a look in her face which warmed his blood.

"I have always been sure that Nigel Anstruthers arranged it."

"Do you think he has been unkind to her?"

"I am going to see," she answered.

"Betty," he said, "tell me all about it."

He knew that this was no suddenly-formed plan, and he knew it would

be well worth while to hear the details of its growth. It was so interestingly like her to have remained silent through the process of thinking a thing out, evolving her final idea without having disturbed him by bringing to him any chaotic uncertainties.

"It's a sort of confession," she answered. "Father, I have been thinking about it for years. I said nothing because for so long I knew I was only a child, and a child's judgment might be worth so little. But through all those years I was learning things and gathering evidence. When I was at school, first in one country and then another, I used to tell myself that I was growing up and preparing myself to do a particular thing--to go to rescue Rosy."

"I used to guess you thought of her in a way of your own," Vanderpoel said, "but I did not guess you were thinking that much. You were always a solid, loyal little thing, and there was business capacity in your keeping your scheme to yourself. Let us look the matter in the face. Suppose she does not need rescuing. Suppose, after all, she is a comfortable, fine lady and adores her husband. What then?"

"If I should find that to be true, I will behave myself very well--as if we had expected nothing else. I will make her a short visit and come away. Lady Cecilia Orme, whom I knew in Florence, has asked me to stay with her in London. I will go to her. She is a charming woman. But I must first see Rosy--SEE her."

Mr. Vanderpoel thought the matter over during a few moments of silence.

"You do not wish your mother to go with you?" he said presently.

"I believe it will be better that she should not," she answered. "If there are difficulties or disappointments she would be too unhappy."

"Yes," he said slowly, "and she could not control her feelings. She would give the whole thing away, poor girl."

He had been looking at the carpet reflectively, and now he looked at Bettina.

"What are you expecting to find, at the worst?" he asked her. "The kind of thing which will need management while it is being looked into?"

"I do not know what I am expecting to find," was her reply. "We know absolutely nothing; but that Rosy was fond of us, and that her marriage has seemed to make her cease to care. She was not like that; she was not like that! Was she, father?"

"No, she wasn't," he exclaimed. The memory of her in her short-frocked and early girlish days, a pretty, smiling, effusive thing, given to lavish caresses and affectionate little surprises for them all, came back to him vividly. "She was the most affectionate girl I ever knew," he said. "She was more affectionate than you, Betty," with a smile.

Bettina smiled in return and bent her head to put a kiss on his hand, a warm, lovely, comprehending kiss.

"If she had been different I should not have thought so much of the change," she said. "I believe that people are always more or less LIKE themselves as long as they live. What has seemed to happen has been so unlike Rosy that there must be some reason for it."

"You think that she has been prevented from seeing us?"

"I think it so possible that I am not going to announce my visit beforehand."

"You have a good head, Betty," her father said.

"If Sir Nigel has put obstacles in our way before, he will do it again. I shall try to find out, when I reach London, if Rosalie is at Stornham. When I am sure she is there, I shall go and present myself. If Sir Nigel meets me at the park gates and orders his gamekeepers to drive me off the premises, we shall at least know that he has some reason for not wishing to regard the usual social and domestic amenities. I feel rather like a detective. It entertains me and excites me a little."

The deep blue of her eyes shone under the shadow of the extravagant lashes as she laughed.

"Are you willing that I should go, father?" she said next.

"Yes," he answered. "I am willing to trust you, Betty, to do things I would not trust other girls to try at. If you were not my girl at all, if you were a man on Wall Street, I should know you would be pretty safe to come out a little more than even in any venture you made. You know how to keep cool."

Bettina picked up her fallen cloak and laid it over her arm. It was made of billowy frills of Malines lace, such as only Vanderpoels could buy. She looked down at the amazing thing and touched up the frills with her fingers as she whimsically smiled.

"There are a good many girls who can be trusted to do things in these days," she said. "Women have found out so much. Perhaps it is because the heroines of novels have informed them. Heroines and heroes always bring in the new fashions in character. I believe it is years since a heroine 'burst into a flood of tears.' It has been discovered, really, that nothing is to be gained by it. Whatsoever I find at Stornham Court, I shall neither weep nor be helpless. There is the Atlantic cable, you know. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why heroines have changed. When they could not escape from their persecutors except in a stage coach, and could not send telegrams, they were more or less in everyone's hands. It is different now. Thank you, father, you are very good to believe in me."