

CHAPTER VIII

THE SECOND-CLASS PASSENGER

Up to a certain point the voyage was like all other voyages. During the first two days there were passengers who did not appear on deck, but as the weather was fair for the season of the year, there were fewer absentees than is usual. Indeed, on the third day the deck chairs were all filled, people who were given to tramping during their voyages had begun to walk their customary quota of carefully-measured miles the day. There were a few pale faces dozing here and there, but the general aspect of things had begun to be sprightly. Shuffleboard players and quoit enthusiasts began to bestir themselves, the deck steward appeared regularly with light repasts of beef tea and biscuits, and the brilliant hues of red, blue, or yellow novels made frequent spots of colour upon the promenade. Persons of some initiative went to the length of making tentative observations to their next-chair neighbours. The second-cabin passengers were cheerful, and the steerage passengers, having tumbled up, formed friendly groups and began to joke with each other.

The Worthingtons had plainly the good fortune to be respectable sailors. They reappeared on the second day and established regular habits, after the manner of accustomed travellers. Miss Vanderpoel's habits were regular from the first, and when Salter saw her he was impressed even more at the outset with her air of being at home instead of on board ship. Her practically well-chosen corner was an agreeable place to look

at. Her chair was built for ease of angle and width, her cushions were of dark rich colours, her travelling rugs were of black fox fur, and she owned an adjustable table for books and accompaniments. She appeared early in the morning and walked until the sea air crimsoned her cheeks, she sat and read with evident enjoyment, she talked to her companions and plainly entertained them.

Salter, being bored and in bad spirits, found himself watching her rather often, but he knew that but for the small, comic episode of Tommy, he would have definitely disliked her. The dislike would not have been fair, but it would have existed in spite of himself. It would not have been fair because it would have been founded simply upon the ignoble resentment of envy, upon the poor truth that he was not in the state of mind to avoid resenting the injustice of fate in bestowing multi-millions upon one person and his offspring. He resented his own resentment, but was obliged to acknowledge its existence in his humour. He himself, especially and peculiarly, had always known the bitterness of poverty, the humiliation of seeing where money could be well used, indeed, ought to be used, and at the same time having ground into him the fact that there was no money to lay one's hand on. He had hated it even as a boy, because in his case, and that of his people, the whole thing was undignified and unbecoming. It was humiliating to him now to bring home to himself the fact that the thing for which he was inclined to dislike this tall, up-standing girl was her unconscious (he realised the unconsciousness of it) air of having always lived in the atmosphere

of millions, of never having known a reason why she should not have anything she had a desire for. Perhaps, upon the whole, he said to himself, it was his own ill luck and sense of defeat which made her corner, with its cushions and comforts, her properly attentive maid, and her cold weather sables expressive of a fortune too colossal to be decent.

The episode of the plump, despairing Tommy he had liked, however. There had been a fine naturalness about it and a fine practicalness in her prompt order to the elderly nurse that the richly-caparisoned donkey should be sent to her. This had at once made it clear to the donor that his gift was too valuable to be left behind.

"She did not care twopence for the lot of us," was his summing up. "She might have been nothing but the nicest possible warm-hearted nursemaid or a cottage woman who loved the child."

He was quite aware that though he had found himself more than once observing her, she herself had probably not recognised the trivial fact of his existing upon that other side of the barrier which separated the higher grade of passenger from the lower. There was, indeed, no reason why she should have singled him out for observation, and she was, in fact, too frequently absorbed in her own reflections to be in the frame of mind to remark her fellow passengers to the extent which was generally customary with her. During her crossings of the Atlantic she usually made mental observation of the people on board. This time, when

she was not talking to the Worthingtons, or reading, she was thinking of the possibilities of her visit to Stornham. She used to walk about the deck thinking of them and, sitting in her chair, sum them up as her eyes rested on the rolling and breaking waves.

There were many things to be considered, and one of the first was the perfectly sane suggestion her father had made.

"Suppose she does not want to be rescued? Suppose you find her a comfortable fine lady who adores her husband."

Such a thing was possible, though Bettina did not think it probable. She intended, however, to prepare herself even for this. If she found Lady Anstruthers plump and roseate, pleased with herself and her position, she was quite equal to making her visit appear a casual and conventional affair.

"I ought to wish it to be so," she thought, "and, yet, how disappointingly I should feel she had changed. Still, even ethical reasons would not excuse one for wishing her to be miserable." She was a creature with a number of passionate ideals which warred frequently with the practical side of her mentality. Often she used to walk up and down the deck or lean upon the ship's side, her eyes stormy with emotions.

"I do not want to find Rosy a heartless woman, and I do not want to find her wretched. What do I want? Only the usual thing--that what cannot be

undone had never been done. People are always wishing that."

She was standing near the second-cabin barrier thinking this, the first time she saw the passenger with the red hair. She had paused by mere chance, and while her eyes were stormy with her thought, she suddenly became conscious that she was looking directly into other eyes as darkling as her own. They were those of a man on the wrong side of the barrier. He had a troubled, brooding face, and, as their gaze met, each of them started slightly and turned away with the sense of having unconsciously intruded and having been intruded upon.

"That rough-looking man," she commented to herself, "is as anxious and disturbed as I am."

Salter did look rough, it was true. His well-worn clothes had suffered somewhat from the restrictions of a second-class cabin shared with two other men. But the aspect which had presented itself to her brief glance had been not so much roughness of clothing as of mood expressing itself in his countenance. He was thinking harshly and angrily of the life ahead of him.

These looks of theirs which had so inadvertently encountered each other were of that order which sometimes startles one when in passing a stranger one finds one's eyes entangled for a second in his or hers, as the case may be. At such times it seems for that instant difficult to disentangle one's gaze. But neither of these two thought of the other

much, after hurrying away. Each was too fully mastered by personal mood.

There would, indeed, have been no reason for their encountering each other further but for "the accident," as it was called when spoken of afterwards, the accident which might so easily have been a catastrophe. It occurred that night. This was two nights before they were to land.

Everybody had begun to come under the influence of that cheerfulness of humour, the sense of relief bordering on gaiety, which generally elates people when a voyage is drawing to a close. If one has been dull, one begins to gather one's self together, rejoiced that the boredom is over. In any case, there are plans to be made, thought of, or discussed.

"You wish to go to Stornham at once?" Mrs. Worthington said to Bettina. "How pleased Lady Anstruthers and Sir Nigel must be at the idea of seeing you with them after so long."

"I can scarcely tell you how I am looking forward to it," Betty answered.

She sat in her corner among her cushions looking at the dark water which seemed to sweep past the ship, and listening to the throb of the engines. She was not gay. She was wondering how far the plans she had made would prove feasible. Mrs. Worthington was not aware that her visit to Stornham Court was to be unannounced. It had not been necessary to explain the matter. The whole affair was simple and decorous enough.

Miss Vanderpoel was to bid good-bye to her friends and go at once to her sister, Lady Anstruthers, whose husband's country seat was but a short journey from London. Bettina and her father had arranged that the fact should be kept from the society paragraphist. This had required some adroit management, but had actually been accomplished.

As the waves swished past her, Bettina was saying to herself, "What will Rosy say when she sees me! What shall I say when I see Rosy? We are drawing nearer to each other with every wave that passes."

A fog which swept up suddenly sent them all below rather early. The Worthingtons laughed and talked a little in their staterooms, but presently became quiet and had evidently gone to bed. Bettina was restless and moved about her room alone after she had sent away her maid. She at last sat down and finished a letter she had been writing to her father.

"As I near the land," she wrote, "I feel a sort of excitement. Several times to-day I have recalled so distinctly the picture of Rosy as I saw her last, when we all stood crowded upon the wharf at New York to see her off. She and Nigel were leaning upon the rail of the upper deck. She looked such a delicate, airy little creature, quite like a pretty schoolgirl with tears in her eyes. She was laughing and crying at the same time, and kissing both her hands to us again and again. I was crying passionately myself, though I tried to conceal the fact, and I remember that each time I looked from Rosy to Nigel's heavy face the

poignancy of my anguish made me break forth again. I wonder if it was because I was a child, that he looked such a contemptuous brute, even when he pretended to smile. It is twelve years since then. I wonder--how I wonder, what I shall find."

She stopped writing and sat a few moments, her chin upon her hand, thinking. Suddenly she sprang to her feet in alarm. The stillness of the night was broken by wild shouts, a running of feet outside, a tumult of mingled sounds and motion, a dash and rush of surging water, a strange thumping and straining of engines, and a moment later she was hurled from one side of her stateroom to the other by a crashing shock which seemed to heave the ship out of the sea, shuddering as if the end of all things had come.

It was so sudden and horrible a thing that, though she had only been flung upon a pile of rugs and cushions and was unhurt, she felt as if she had been struck on the head and plunged into wild delirium. Above the sound of the dashing and rocking waves, the straining and roaring of hacking engines and the pandemonium of voices rose from one end of the ship to the other, one wild, despairing, long-drawn shriek of women and children. Bettina turned sick at the mad terror in it--the insensate, awful horror.

"Something has run into us!" she gasped, getting up with her heart leaping in her throat.

She could hear the Worthingtons' tempest of terrified confusion through the partitions between them, and she remembered afterwards that in the space of two or three seconds, and in the midst of their clamour, a hundred incongruous thoughts leaped through her brain. Perhaps they were this moment going down. Now she knew what it was like! This thing she had read of in newspapers! Now she was going down in mid-ocean, she, Betty Vanderpoel! And, as she sprang to clutch her fur coat, there flashed before her mental vision a gruesome picture of the headlines in the newspapers and the inevitable reference to the millions she represented.

"I must keep calm," she heard herself say, as she fastened the long coat, clenching her teeth to keep them from chattering. "Poor Daddy--poor Daddy!"

Maddening new sounds were all about her, sounds of water dashing and churning, sounds of voices bellowing out commands, straining and leaping sounds of the engines. What was it--what was it? She must at least find out. Everybody was going mad in the staterooms, the stewards were rushing about, trying to quiet people, their own voices shaking and breaking into cracked notes. If the worst had happened, everyone would be fighting for life in a few minutes. Out on deck she must get and find out for herself what the worst was.

She was the first woman outside, though the wails and shrieks swelled

below, and half-dressed, ghastly creatures tumbled gasping up the companion-way.

"What is it?" she heard. "My God! what's happened? Where's the Captain! Are we going down! The boats! The boats!"

It was useless to speak to the seamen rushing by. They did not see, much less hear! She caught sight of a man who could not be a sailor, since he was standing still. She made her way to him, thankful that she had managed to stop her teeth chattering.

"What has happened to us?" she said.

He turned and looked at her straitly. He was the second-cabin passenger with the red hair.

"A tramp steamer has run into us in the fog," he answered.

"How much harm is done?"

"They are trying to find out. I am standing here on the chance of hearing something. It is madness to ask any man questions."

They spoke to each other in short, sharp sentences, knowing there was no time to lose.

"Are you horribly frightened?" he asked.

She stamped her foot.

"I hate it--I hate it!" she said, flinging out her hand towards the black, heaving water. "The plunge--the choking! No one could hate it more. But I want to DO something!"

She was turning away when he caught her hand and held her.

"Wait a second," he said. "I hate it as much as you do, but I believe we two can keep our heads. Those who can do that may help, perhaps. Let us try to quiet the people. As soon as I find out anything I will come to your friends' stateroom. You are near the boats there. Then I shall go back to the second cabin. You work on your side and I'll work on mine. That's all."

"Thank you. Tell the Worthingtons. I'm going to the saloon deck." She was off as she spoke.

Upon the stairway she found herself in the midst of a struggling panic-stricken mob, tripping over each other on the steps, and clutching at any garment nearest, to drag themselves up as they fell, or were on the point of falling. Everyone was crying out in question and appeal.

Bettina stood still, a firm, tall obstacle, and clutched at the hysteric

woman who was hurled against her.

"I've been on deck," she said. "A tramp steamer has run into us. No one has time to answer questions. The first thing to do is to put on warm clothes and secure the life belts in case you need them."

At once everyone turned upon her as if she was an authority. She replied with almost fierce determination to the torrent of words poured forth.

"I know nothing further--only that if one is not a fool one must make sure of clothes and belts."

"Quite right, Miss Vanderpoel," said one young man, touching his cap in nervous propitiation.

"Stop screaming," Betty said mercilessly to the woman. "It's idiotic--the more noise you make the less chance you have. How can men keep their wits among a mob of shrieking, mad women?"

That the remote Miss Vanderpoel should have emerged from her luxurious corner to frankly bully the lot of them was an excellent shock for the crowd. Men, who had been in danger of losing their heads and becoming as uncontrolled as the women, suddenly realised the fact and pulled themselves together. Bettina made her way at once to the Worthingtons' staterooms.

There she found frenzy reigning. Blanche and Marie Worthington were darting to and fro, dragging about first one thing and then another. They were silly with fright, and dashed at, and dropped alternately, life belts, shoes, jewel cases, and wraps, while they sobbed and cried out hysterically. "Oh, what shall we do with mother! What shall we do!"

The manners of Betty Vanderpoel's sharp schoolgirl days returned to her in full force. She seized Blanche by the shoulder and shook her.

"What a donkey you are!" she said. "Put on your clothes. There they are," pushing her to the place where they hung. "Marie--dress yourself this moment. We may be in no real danger at all."

"Do you think not! Oh, Betty!" they wailed in concert. "Oh, what shall we do with mother!"

"Where is your mother?"

"She fainted--Louise----"

Betty was in Mrs. Worthington's cabin before they had finished speaking. The poor woman had fainted, and struck her cheek against a chair. She lay on the floor in her nightgown, with blood trickling from a cut on her face. Her maid, Louise, was wringing her hands, and doing nothing whatever.

"If you don't bring the brandy this minute," said the beautiful Miss Vanderpoel, "I'll box your ears. Believe me, my girl." She looked so capable of doing it that the woman was startled and actually offended into a return of her senses. Miss Vanderpoel had usually the best possible manners in dealing with her inferiors.

Betty poured brandy down Mrs. Worthington's throat and applied strong smelling salts until she gasped back to consciousness. She had just burst into frightened sobs, when Betty heard confusion and exclamations in the adjoining room. Blanche and Marie had cried out, and a man's voice was speaking. Betty went to them. They were in various stages of undress, and the red-haired second-cabin passenger was standing at the door.

"I promised Miss Vanderpoel----" he was saying, when Betty came forward. He turned to her promptly.

"I come to tell you that it seems absolutely to be relied on that there is no immediate danger. The tramp is more injured than we are."

"Oh, are you sure? Are you sure?" panted Blanche, catching at his sleeve.

"Yes," he answered. "Can I do anything for you?" he said to Bettina, who was on the point of speaking.

"Will you be good enough to help me to assist Mrs. Worthington into her berth, and then try to find the doctor."

He went into the next room without speaking. To Mrs. Worthington he spoke briefly a few words of reassurance. He was a powerful man, and laid her on her berth without dragging her about uncomfortably, or making her feel that her weight was greater than even in her most desponding moments she had suspected. Even her helplessly hysteric mood was illuminated by a ray of grateful appreciation.

"Oh, thank you--thank you," she murmured. "And you are quite sure there is no actual danger, Mr.----?"

"Salter," he terminated for her. "You may feel safe. The damage is really only slight, after all."

"It is so good of you to come and tell us," said the poor lady, still tremulous. "The shock was awful. Our introduction has been an alarming one. I--I don't think we have met during the voyage."

"No," replied Salter. "I am in the second cabin."

"Oh! thank you. It's so good of you," she faltered amiably, for want of inspiration. As he went out of the stateroom, Salter spoke to Bettina.

"I will send the doctor, if I can find him," he said. "I think, perhaps,

you had better take some brandy yourself. I shall."

"It's queer how little one seems to realise even that there are second-cabin passengers," commented Mrs. Worthington feebly. "That was a nice man, and perfectly respectable. He even had a kind of--of manner."