CHAPTER XX

THINGS OCCUR IN STORNHAM VILLAGE

It would not have been possible for Miss Vanderpoel to remain long in social seclusion in London, and, before many days had passed, Stornham village was enlivened by the knowledge that her ladyship and her sister had returned to the Court. It was also evident that their visit to London had not been made to no purpose. The stagnation of the waters of village life threatened to become a whirlpool. A respectable person, who was to be her ladyship's maid, had come with them, and her ladyship had not been served by a personal attendant for years. Her ladyship had also appeared at the dinner-table in new garments, and with her hair done as other ladies wore theirs. She looked like a different woman, and actually had a bit of colour, and was beginning to lose her frightened way. Now it dawned upon even the dullest and least active mind that something had begun to stir.

It had been felt vaguely when the new young lady from "Meriker" had walked through the village street, and had drawn people to doors and windows by her mere passing. After the return from London the signs of activity were such as made the villagers catch their breaths in uttering uncertain exclamations, and caused the feminine element to catch up offspring or, dragging it by its hand, run into neighbours' cottages and stand talking the incredible thing over in lowered and rather breathless voices. Yet the incredible thing in question was--had it been seen from

the standpoint of more prosperous villagers--anything but extraordinary. In entirely rural places the Castle, the Hall or the Manor, the Great House--in short--still retains somewhat of the old feudal power to bestow benefits or withhold them. Wealth and good will at the Manor supply work and resultant comfort in the village and its surrounding holdings. Patronised by the Great House the two or three small village shops bestir themselves and awaken to activity. The blacksmith swings his hammer with renewed spirit over the numerous jobs the gentry's stables, carriage houses, garden tools, and household repairs give to him. The carpenter mends and makes, the vicarage feels at ease, realising that its church and its charities do not stand unsupported. Small farmers and larger ones, under a rich and interested landlord, thrive and are able to hold their own even against the tricks of wind and weather. Farm labourers being, as a result, certain of steady and decent wage, trudge to and fro, with stolid cheerfulness, knowing that the pot boils and the children's feet are shod. Superannuated old men and women are sure of their broth and Sunday dinner, and their dread of the impending "Union" fades away. The squire or my lord or my lady can be depended upon to care for their old bones until they are laid under the sod in the green churchyard. With wealth and good will at the Great House, life warms and offers prospects. There are Christmas feasts and gifts and village treats, and the big carriage or the smaller ones stop at cottage doors and at once confer exciting distinction and carry good cheer.

But Stornham village had scarcely a remote memory of any period of such

prosperity. It had not existed even in the older Sir Nigel's time, and certainly the present Sir Nigel's reign had been marked only by neglect, ill-temper, indifference, and a falling into disorder and decay. Farms were poorly worked, labourers were unemployed, there was no trade from the manor household, no carriages, no horses, no company, no spending of money. Cottages leaked, floors were damp, the church roof itself was falling to pieces, and the vicar had nothing to give. The helpless and old cottagers were carried to the "Union" and, dying there, were buried by the stinted parish in parish coffins.

Her ladyship had not visited the cottages since her child's birth. And now such inspiriting events as were everyday happenings in lucky places like Westerbridge and Wratcham and Yangford, showed signs of being about to occur in Stornham itself.

To begin with, even before the journey to London, Kedgers had made two or three visits to The Clock, and had been in a communicative mood. He had related the story of the morning when he had looked up from his work and had found the strange young lady standing before him, with the result that he had been "struck all of a heap." And then he had given a detailed account of their walk round the place, and of the way in which she had looked at things and asked questions, such as would have done credit to a man "with a 'ead on 'im."

"Nay! Nay!" commented Kedgers, shaking his own head doubtfully, even while with admiration. "I've never seen the like before--in young

women--neither in lady young women nor in them that's otherwise."

Afterwards had transpired the story of Mrs. Noakes, and the kitchen grate, Mrs. Noakes having a friend in Miss Lupin, the village dressmaker.

"I'd not put it past her," was Mrs. Noakes' summing up, "to order a new one, I wouldn't."

The footman in the shabby livery had been a little wild in his statements, being rendered so by the admiring and excited state of his mind. He dwelt upon the matter of her "looks," and the way she lighted up the dingy dining-room, and so conversed that a man found himself listening and glancing when it was his business to be an unhearing, unseeing piece of mechanism.

Such simple records of servitors' impressions were quite enough for Stornham village, and produced in it a sense of being roused a little from sleep to listen to distant and uncomprehended, but not unagreeable, sounds.

One morning Buttle, the carpenter, looked up as Kedgers had done, and saw standing on the threshold of his shop the tall young woman, who was a sensation and an event in herself.

"You are the master of this shop?" she asked.

Buttle came forward, touching his brow in hasty salute.

"Yes, my lady," he answered. "Joseph Buttle, your ladyship."

"I am Miss Vanderpoel," dismissing the suddenly bestowed title with easy directness. "Are you busy? I want to talk to you."

No one had any reason to be "busy" at any time in Stornham village, no such luck; but Buttle did not smile as he replied that he was at liberty and placed himself at his visitor's disposal. The tall young lady came into the little shop, and took the chair respectfully offered to her. Buttle saw her eyes sweep the place as if taking in its resources.

"I want to talk to you about some work which must be done at the Court," she explained at once. "I want to know how much can be done by workmen of the village. How many men have you?"

"How many men had he?" Buttle wavered between gratification at its being supposed that he had "men" under him and grumpy depression because the illusion must be dispelled.

"There's me and Sim Soames, miss," he answered. "No more, an' no less."

"Where can you get more?" asked Miss Vanderpoel.

It could not be denied that Buttle received a mental shock which verged in its suddenness on being almost a physical one. The promptness and decision of such a query swept him off his feet. That Sim Soames and himself should be an insufficient force to combat with such repairs as the Court could afford was an idea presenting an aspect of unheard-of novelty, but that methods as coolly radical as those this questioning implied, should be resorted to, was staggering.

"Me and Sim has always done what work was done," he stammered. "It hasn't been much."

Miss Vanderpoel neither assented to nor dissented from this last palpable truth. She regarded Buttle with searching eyes. She was wondering if any practical ability concealed itself behind his dullness. If she gave him work, could he do it? If she gave the whole village work, was it too far gone in its unspurred stodginess to be roused to carrying it out?

"There is a great deal to be done now," she said. "All that can be done in the village should be done here. It seems to me that the villagers want work--new work. Do they?"

Work! New work! The spark of life in her steady eyes actually lighted a spark in the being of Joe Buttle. Young ladies in villages--gentry--usually visited the cottagers a bit if they were well-meaning young women--left good books and broth or jelly, pottered

about and were seen at church, and playing croquet, and finally married and removed to other places, or gradually faded year by year into respectable spinsterhood. And this one comes in, and in two or three minutes shows that she knows things about the place and understands. A man might then take it for granted that she would understand the thing he daringly gathered courage to say.

"They want any work, miss--that they are sure of decent pay for--sure of it."

She did understand. And she did not treat his implication as an impertinence. She knew it was not intended as one, and, indeed, she saw in it a sort of earnest of a possible practical quality in Buttle.
Such work as the Court had demanded had remained unpaid for with quiet persistence, until even bills had begun to lag and fall off. She could see exactly how it had been done, and comprehended quite clearly a lack of enthusiasm in the presence of orders from the Great House.

"All work will be paid for," she said. "Each week the workmen will receive their wages. They may be sure. I will be responsible."

"Thank you, miss," said Buttle, and he half unconsciously touched his forehead again.

"In a place like this," the young lady went on in her mellow voice, and with a reflective thoughtfulness in her handsome eyes, "on an estate

like Stornham, no work that can be done by the villagers should be done by anyone else. The people of the land should be trained to do such work as the manor house, or cottages, or farms require to have done."

"How did she think that out?" was Buttle's reflection. In places such as Stornham, through generation after generation, the thing she had just said was accepted as law, clung to as a possession, any divergence from it being a grievance sullenly and bitterly grumbled over. And in places enough there was divergence in these days--the gentry sending to London for things, and having up workmen to do their best-paying jobs for them. The law had been so long a law that no village could see justice in outsiders being sent for, even to do work they could not do well themselves. It showed what she was, this handsome young woman--even though she did come from America--that she should know what was right.

She took a note-book out and opened it on the rough table before her.

"I have made some notes here," she said, "and a sketch or two. We must talk them over together."

If she had given Joe Buttle cause for surprise at the outset, she gave him further cause during the next half-hour. The work that was to be done was such as made him open his eyes, and draw in his breath. If he was to be allowed to do it--if he could do it--if it was to be paid for--it struck him that he would be a man set up for life. If her ladyship had come and ordered it to be done, he would have thought the

poor thing had gone mad. But this one had it all jotted down in a clear hand, without the least feminine confusion of detail, and with here and there a little sharply-drawn sketch, such as a carpenter, if he could draw, which Buttle could not, might have made.

"There's not workmen enough in the village to do it in a year, miss," he said at last, with a gasp of disappointment.

She thought it over a minute, her pencil poised in her hand and her eyes on his face.

"Can you," she said, "undertake to get men from other villages, and superintend what they do? If you can do that, the work is still passing through your hands, and Stornham will reap the benefit of it. Your workmen will lodge at the cottages and spend part of their wages at the shops, and you who are a Stornham workman will earn the money to be made
out of a rather large contract."

Joe Buttle became quite hot. If you have brought up a family for years on the proceeds of such jobs as driving a ten-penny nail in here or there, tinkering a hole in a cottage roof, knocking up a shelf in the vicarage kitchen, and mending a panel of fence, to be suddenly confronted with a proposal to engage workmen and undertake "contracts" is shortening to the breath and heating to the blood.

"Miss," he said, "we've never done big jobs, Sim Soames an' me. P'raps we're not up to it--but it'd be a fortune to us."

She was looking down at one of her papers and making pencil marks on it.

"You did some work last year on a little house at Tidhurst, didn't you?" she said.

To think of her knowing that! Yes, the unaccountable good luck had actually come to him that two Tidhurst carpenters, falling ill of the same typhoid at the same time, through living side by side in the same order of unsanitary cottage, he and Sim had been given their work to finish, and had done their best.

"Yes, miss," he answered.

"I heard that when I was inquiring about you. I drove over to Tidhurst to see the work, and it was very sound and well done. If you did that, I can at least trust you to do something at the Court which will prove to me what you are equal to. I want a Stornham man to undertake this."

"No Tidhurst man," said Joe Buttle, with sudden courage, "nor yet no Barnhurst, nor yet no Yangford, nor Wratcham shall do it, if I can look it in the face. It's Stornham work and Stornham had ought to have it. It gives me a brace-up to hear of it."

The tall young lady laughed beautifully and got up.

"Come to the Court to-morrow morning at ten, and we will look it over together," she said. "Good-morning, Buttle." And she went away.

In the taproom of The Clock, when Joe Buttle dropped in for his pot of beer, he found Fox, the saddler, and Tread, the blacksmith, and each of them fell upon the others with something of the same story to tell. The new young lady from the Court had been to see them, too, and had brought to each her definite little note-book. Harness was to be repaired and furbished up, the big carriage and the old phaeton were to be put in order, and Master Ughtred's cart was to be given new paint and springs.

"This is what she said," Fox's story ran, "and she said it so straightforward and business-like that the conceitedest man that lived couldn't be upset by it. 'I want to see what you can do,' she says. 'I am new to the place and I must find out what everyone can do, then I shall know what to do myself.' The way she sets them eyes on a man is a sight. It's the sense in them and the human nature that takes you."

"Yes, it's the sense," said Tread, "and her looking at you as if she expected you to have sense yourself, and understand that she's doing fair business. It's clear-headed like--her asking questions and finding out what Stornham men can do. She's having the old things done up so that she can find out, and so that she can prove that the Court work is going to be paid for. That's my belief."

"But what does it all mean?" said Joe Buttle, setting his pot of beer down on the taproom table, round which they sat in conclave. "Where's the money coming from? There's money somewhere."

Tread was the advanced thinker of the village. He had come--through reverses--from a bigger place. He read the newspapers.

"It'll come from where it's got a way of coming," he gave forth portentously. "It'll come from America. How they manage to get hold of so much of it there is past me. But they've got it, dang 'em, and they're ready to spend it for what they want, though they're a sharp lot. Twelve years ago there was a good bit of talk about her ladyship's father being one of them with the fullest pockets. She came here with plenty, but Sir Nigel got hold of it for his games, and they're the games that cost money. Her ladyship wasn't born with a backbone, poor thing, but this new one was, and her ladyship's father is her father, and you mark my words, there's money coming into Stornham, though it's not going to be played the fool with. Lord, yes! this new one has a backbone and good strong wrists and a good strong head, though I must say"--with a little masculine chuckle of admission--"it's a bit unnatural with them eyelashes and them eyes looking at you between 'em. Like blue water between rushes in the marsh."

Before the next twenty-four hours had passed a still more unlooked-for event had taken place. Long outstanding bills had been paid, and in as

matter-of-fact manner as if they had not been sent in and ignored, in some cases for years. The settlement of Joe Buttle's account sent him to bed at the day's end almost light-headed. To become suddenly the possessor of thirty-seven pounds, fifteen and tenpence half-penny, of which all hope had been lost three years ago, was almost too much for any man. Six pounds, eight pounds, ten pounds, came into places as if sovereigns had been sixpences, and shillings farthings. More than one cottage woman, at the sight of the hoarded wealth in her staring goodman's hand, gulped and began to cry. If they had had it before, and in driblets, it would have been spent long since, now, in a lump, it meant shoes and petticoats and tea and sugar in temporary abundance, and the sense of this abundance was felt to be entirely due to American magic. America was, in fact, greatly lauded and discussed, the case of "Gaarge" Lumsden being much quoted.