CHAPTER XXII

ONE OF MR. VANDERPOEL'S LETTERS

Mr. Germen, the secretary of the great Mr. Vanderpoel, in arranging the neat stacks of letters preparatory to his chief's entrance to his private room each morning, knowing where each should be placed, understood that such as were addressed in Miss Vanderpoel's hand would be read before anything else. This had been the case even when she had just been placed in a French school, a tall, slim little girl, with immense demanding eyes, and a thick black plait of hair swinging between her straight, rather thin, shoulders. Between other financial potentates and their little girls, Mr. Germen knew that the oddly confidential relation which existed between these two was unusual. Her schoolgirl letters, it had been understood, should be given the first place on the stacks of envelopes each incoming ocean steamer brought in its mail bags. Since the beginning of her visit to her sister, Lady Anstruthers, the exact dates of mail steamers seemed to be of increased importance. Miss Vanderpoel evidently found much to write about. Each steamer brought a full-looking envelope to be placed in a prominent position.

On a hot morning in the early summer Mr. Germen found two or three--two of them of larger size and seeming to contain business papers. These he placed where they would be seen at once. Mr. Vanderpoel was a little later than usual in his arrival. At this season he came from his place in the country, and before leaving it this morning he had been talking

to his wife, whom he found rather disturbed by a chance encounter with a young woman who had returned to visit her mother after a year spent in England with her English husband. This young woman, now Lady Bowen, once

Milly Jones, had been one of the amusing marvels of New York. A girl neither rich nor so endowed by nature as to be able to press upon the world any special claim to consideration as a beauty, her enterprise, and the daring of her tactics, had been the delight of many a satiric onlooker. In her schooldays she had ingenuously mapped out her future career. Other American girls married men with titles, and she intended to do the same thing. The other little girls laughed, but they liked to hear her talk. All information regarding such unions as was to be found in the newspapers and magazines, she collected and studiously read--sometimes aloud to her companions.

Social paragraphs about royalties, dukes and duchesses, lords and ladies, court balls and glittering functions, she devoured and learned by heart. An abominably vulgar little person, she was an interestingly pertinacious creature, and wrought night and day at acquiring an air of fashionable elegance, at first naturally laying it on in such manner as suggested that it should be scraped off with a knife, but with experience gaining a certain specious knowledge of forms. How the over-mature child at school had assimilated her uncanny young worldliness, it would have been less difficult to decide, if possible sources had been less numerous. The air was full of it, the literature of the day, the chatter of afternoon teas, the gossip of the hour.

Before she was fifteen she saw the indiscretion of her childish frankness, and realised that it might easily be detrimental to her ambitions. She said no more of her plans for her future, and even took the astute tone of carelessly treating as a joke her vulgar little past. But no titled foreigner appeared upon the horizon without setting her small, but business-like, brain at work. Her lack of wealth and assured position made her situation rather hopeless. She was not of the class of lucky young women whose parents' gorgeous establishments offered attractions to wandering persons of rank. She and her mother lived in a flat, and gave rather pathetic afternoon teas in return for such more brilliant hospitalities as careful and pertinacious calling and recalling obliged their acquaintances to feel they could not decently be left wholly out of. Milly and her anxious mother had worked hard. They lost no opportunity of writing a note, or sending a Christmas card, or an economical funeral wreath. By daily toil and the amicable ignoring of casualness of manner or slights, they managed to cling to the edge of the precipice of social oblivion, into whose depths a lesser degree of assiduity, or a greater sensitiveness, would have plunged them. Once--early in Milly's career, when her ever-ready chatter and her superficial brightness were a novelty, it had seemed for a short time that luck might be glancing towards her. A young man of foreign title and of Bohemian tastes met her at a studio dance, and, misled by the smartness of her dress and her always carefully carried air of careless prosperity, began to pay a delusive court to her. For a few weeks all her freshest frocks were worn assiduously and credit was strained to buy new ones. The flat was adorned with fresh flowers and several new yellow

and pale blue cushions appeared at the little teas, which began to assume a more festive air. Desirable people, who went ordinarily to the teas at long intervals and through reluctant weakness, or sometimes rebellious amiability, were drummed up and brought firmly to the fore. Milly herself began to look pink and fluffy through mere hopeful good spirits. Her thin little laugh was heard incessantly, and people amusedly if they were good-tempered, derisively if they were spiteful, wondered if it really would come to something. But it did not. The young foreigner suddenly left New York, making his adieus with entire lightness. There was the end of it. He had heard something about lack of income and uncertainty of credit, which had suggested to him that discretion was the better part of valour. He married later a young lady in the West, whose father was a solid person.

Less astute young women, under the circumstances, would have allowed themselves a week or so of headache or influenza, but Milly did not. She made calls in the new frocks, and with such persistent spirit that she fished forth from the depths of indifferent hospitality two or three excellent invitations. She wore her freshest pink frock, and an amazingly clever little Parisian diamond crescent in her hair, at the huge Monson ball at Delmonico's, and it was recorded that it was on that glittering occasion that her "Uncle James" was first brought upon the scene. He was only mentioned lightly at first. It was to Milly's credit that he was not made too much of. He was casually touched upon as a very rich uncle, who lived in Dakota, and had actually lived there since his youth, letting his few relations know nothing of him. He had been rather

a black sheep as a boy, but Milly's mother had liked him, and, when he had run away from New York, he had told her what he was going to do, and had kissed her when she cried, and had taken her daguerreotype with him. Now he had written, and it turned out that he was enormously rich, and was interested in Milly. From that time Uncle James formed an atmosphere. He did not appear in New York, but Milly spent the next season in London, and the Monsons, being at Hurlingham one day, had her pointed out to them as a new American girl, who was the idol of a millionaire uncle. She was not living in an ultra fashionable quarter, or with ultra fashionable people, but she was, on all occasions, they heard, beautifully dressed and beautifully--if a little heavily--hung with gauds and gems, her rings being said to be quite amazing and suggesting an impassioned lavishness on the part of Uncle James. London, having become inured to American marvels--Milly's bit of it--accepted and enjoyed Uncle James and all the sumptuous attributes of his Dakota.

English people would swallow anything sometimes, Mrs. Monson commented

sagely, and yet sometimes they stared and evidently thought you were lying about the simplest things. Milly's corner of South Kensington had gulped down the Dakota uncle. Her managing in this way, if there was no uncle, was too clever and amusing. She had left her mother at home to scrimp and save, and by hook or by crook she had contrived to get a number of quite good things to wear. She wore them with such an air of accustomed resource that the jewels might easily--mixed with some relics of her mother's better days--be of the order of the clever little

Parisian diamond crescent. It was Milly's never-laid-aside manner which did it. The announcement of her union with Sir Arthur Bowen was received in certain New York circles with little suppressed shrieks of glee. It had been so sharp of her to aim low and to realise so quickly that she could not aim high. The baronetcy was a recent one, and not unconnected with trade. Sir Arthur was not a rich man, and, had it leaked out, believed in Uncle James. If he did not find him all his fancy painted, Milly was clever enough to keep him quiet. She was, when all was said and done, one of the American women of title, her servants and the tradespeople addressed her as "my lady," and with her capacity for appropriating what was most useful, and her easy assumption of possessing all required, she was a very smart person indeed. She provided herself with an English accent, an English vocabulary, and an English manner, and in certain circles was felt to be most impressive.

At an afternoon function in the country Mrs. Vanderpoel had met Lady Bowen. She had been one of the few kindly ones, who in the past had given an occasional treat to Milly Jones for her girlhood's sake. Lady Bowen, having gathered a small group of hearers, was talking volubly to it, when the nice woman entered, and, catching sight of her, she swept across the room. It would not have been like Milly to fail to see and greet at once the wife of Reuben Vanderpoel. She would count anywhere, even in London sets it was not easy to connect one's self with. She had already discovered that there were almost as many difficulties to be surmounted in London by the wife of an unimportant baronet as there had been to be overcome in New York by a girl without money or place. It was

well to have something in the way of information to offer in one's small talk with the lucky ones and Milly knew what subject lay nearest to Mrs. Vanderpoel's heart.

"Miss Vanderpoel has evidently been enjoying her visit to Stornham Court," she said, after her first few sentences. "I met Mrs. Worthington at the Embassy, and she said she had buried herself in the country. But I think she must have run up to town quietly for shopping. I saw her one day in Piccadilly, and I was almost sure Lady Anstruthers was with her in the carriage--almost sure."

Mrs. Vanderpoel's heart quickened its beat.

"You were so young when she married," she said. "I daresay you have forgotten her face."

"Oh, no!" Milly protested effusively. "I remember her quite well. She was so pretty and pink and happy-looking, and her hair curled naturally. I used to pray every night that when I grew up I might have hair and a complexion like hers."

Mrs. Vanderpoel's kind, maternal face fell.

"And you were not sure you recognised her? Well, I suppose twelve years does make a difference," her voice dragging a little.

Milly saw that she had made a blunder. The fact was she had not even guessed at Rosy's identity until long after the carriage had passed her.

"Oh, you see," she hesitated, "their carriage was not near me, and I was not expecting to see them. And perhaps she looked a little delicate. I heard she had been rather delicate."

She felt she was floundering, and bravely floundered away from the subject. She plunged into talk of Betty and people's anxiety to see her, and the fact that the society columns were already faintly heralding her. She would surely come soon to town. It was too late for the first Drawing-room this year. When did Mrs. Vanderpoel think she would be presented? Would Lady Anstruthers present her? Mrs. Vanderpoel could not bring her back to Rosy, and the nature of the change which had made it difficult to recognise her.

The result of this chance encounter was that she did not sleep very well, and the next morning talked anxiously to her husband.

"What I could see, Reuben, was that Milly Bowen had not known her at all, even when she saw her in the carriage with Betty. She couldn't have changed as much as that, if she had been taken care of, and happy."

Her affection and admiration for her husband were such as made the task of soothing her a comparatively simple thing. The instinct of tenderness for the mate his youth had chosen was an unchangeable one in Reuben

Vanderpoel. He was not a primitive man, but in this he was as unquestioningly simple as if he had been a kindly New England farmer. He had outgrown his wife, but he had always loved and protected her gentle goodness. He had never failed her in her smallest difficulty, he could not bear to see her hurt. Betty had been his compeer and his companion almost since her childhood, but his wife was the tenderest care of his days. There was a strong sense of relief in his thought of Betty now. It was good to remember the fineness of her perceptions, her clearness of judgment, and recall that they were qualities he might rely upon.

When he left his wife to take his train to town, he left her smiling again. She scarcely knew how her fears had been dispelled. His talk had all been kindly, practical, and reasonable. It was true Betty had said in her letter that Rosy had been rather delicate, and had not been taking very good care of herself, but that was to be remedied. Rosy had made a little joke or so about it herself.

"Betty says I am not fat enough for an English matron. I am drinking milk and breakfasting in bed, and am going to be massaged to please her. I believe we all used to obey Betty when she was a child, and now she is so tall and splendid, one would never dare to cross her. Oh, mother! I am so happy at having her with me!"

To reread just these simple things caused the suggestion of things not comfortably normal to melt away. Mrs. Vanderpoel sat down at a sunny window with her lap full of letters, and forgot Milly Bowen's

floundering.

When Mr. Vanderpoel reached his office and glanced at his carefully arranged morning's mail, Mr. Germen saw him smile at the sight of the envelopes addressed in his daughter's hand. He sat down to read them at once, and, as he read, the smile of welcome became a shrewd and deeply interested one.

"She has undertaken a good-sized contract," he was saying to himself, "and she's to be trusted to see it through. It is rather fine, the way she manages to combine emotions and romance and sentiments with practical good business, without letting one interfere with the other. It's none of it bad business this, as the estate is entailed, and the boy is Rosy's. It's good business."

This was what Betty had written to her father in New York from Stornham Court.

"The things I am beginning to do, it would be impossible for me to resist doing, and it would certainly be impossible for you. The thing I am seeing I have never seen, at close hand, before, though I have taken in something almost its parallel as part of certain picturesqueness of scenes in other countries. But I am LIVING with this and also, through relationship to Rosy, I, in a measure, belong to it, and it belongs to me. You and I may have often seen in American villages crudeness, incompleteness, lack of comfort, and the composition of a picture,

a rough ugliness the result of haste and unsettled life which stays nowhere long, but packs up its goods and chattels and wanders farther afield in search of something better or worse, in any case in search of change, but we have never seen ripe, gradual falling to ruin of what generations ago was beautiful. To me it is wonderful and tragic and touching. If you could see the Court, if you could see the village, if you could see the church, if you could see the people, all quietly disintegrating, and so dearly perfect in their way that if one knew absolutely that nothing could be done to save them, one could only stand still and catch one's breath and burst into tears. The church has stood since the Conquest, and, as it still stands, grey and fine, with its mass of square tower, and despite the state of its roof, is not yet given wholly to the winds and weather, it will, no doubt, stand a few centuries longer. The Court, however, cannot long remain a possible habitation, if it is not given a new lease of life. I do not mean that it will crumble to-morrow, or the day after, but we should not think it habitable now, even while we should admit that nothing could be more delightful to look at. The cottages in the village are already, many of them, amazing, when regarded as the dwellings of human beings. How long ago the cottagers gave up expecting that anything in particular would be done for them, I do not know. I am impressed by the fact that they are an unexpecting people. Their calm non-expectancy fills me with interest. Only centuries of waiting for their superiors in rank to do things for them, and the slow formation of the habit of realising that not to submit to disappointment was no use, could have produced the almost SERENITY of their attitude. It is all very well for newborn republican

nations--meaning my native land--to sniff sternly and say that such a state of affairs is an insult to the spirit of the race. Perhaps it is now, but it was not apparently centuries ago, which was when it all began and when 'Man' and the 'Race' had not developed to the point of asking questions, to which they demand replies, about themselves and the things which happened to them. It began in the time of Egbert and Canute, and earlier, in the days of the Druids, when they used peacefully to allow themselves to be burned by the score, enclosed in wicker idols, as natural offerings to placate the gods. The modern acceptance of things is only a somewhat attenuated remnant of the ancient idea. And this is what I have to deal with and understand. When I begin to do the things I am going to do, with the aid of your practical advice, if I have your approval, the people will be at first rather afraid of me. They will privately suspect I am mad. It will, also, not seem at all unlikely that an American should be of unreasoningly extravagant and flighty mind. Stornham, having long slumbered in remote peace through lack of railroad convenience, still regards America as almost of the character of wild rumour. Rosy was their one American, and she disappeared from their view so soon that she had not time to make any lasting impression. I am asking myself how difficult, or how simple, it will be to quite understand these people, and to make them understand me. I greatly doubt its being simple. Layers and layers and layers of centuries must be far from easy to burrow through. They look simple, they do not know that they are not simple, but really they are not. Their point of view has been the point of view of the English peasant so many hundred years that an American point of

view, which has had no more than a trifling century and a half to form itself in, may find its thews and sinews the less powerful of the two. When I walk down the village street, faces appear at windows, and figures, stolidly, at doors. What I see is that, vaguely and remotely, American though I am, the fact that I am of 'her ladyship's blood,' and that her ladyship--American though she is--has the claim on them of being the mother of the son of the owner of the land--stirs in them a feeling that I have a shadowy sort of relationship in the whole thing, and with regard to their bad roofs and bad chimneys, to their broken palings, and damp floors, to their comforts and discomforts, a sort of responsibility. That is the whole thing, and you--just you, father--will understand me when I say that I actually like it. I might not like it if I were poor Rosy, but, being myself, I love it. There is something patriarchal in it which moves me.

"Is it an abounding and arrogant delight in power which makes it appeal to me, or is it something better? To feel that every man on the land, every woman, every child knew one, counted on one's honour and friendship, turned to one believingly in time of stress, to know that one could help and be a finely faithful thing, the very knowledge of it would give one vigour and warm blood in the veins. I wish I had been born to it, I wish the first sounds falling on my newborn ears had been the clanging of the peal from an old Norman church tower, calling out to me, 'Welcome; newcomer of our house, long life among us! Welcome!' Still, though the first sounds that greeted me were probably the rattling of a Fifth Avenue stage, I have brought them SOMETHING, and

who knows whether I could have brought it from without the range of that prosaic, but cheerful, rattle."

The rest of the letter was detail of a business-like order. A large envelope contained the detail-notes of things to be done, notes concerning roofs, windows, flooring, park fences, gardens, greenhouses, tool houses, potting sheds, garden walls, gates, woodwork, masonry. Sharp little sketches, such as Buttle had seen, notes concerning Buttle, Fox, Tread, Kedgers, and less accomplished workmen; concerning wages of day labourers, hours, capabilities. Buttle, if he had chanced to see them, would have broken into a light perspiration at the idea of a young woman having compiled the documents. He had never heard of the first Reuben Vanderpoel.

Her father's reply to Betty was as long as her own to him, and gave her keen pleasure by its support, both of sympathetic interest and practical advice. He left none of her points unnoted, and dealt with each of them as she had most hoped and indeed had felt she knew he would. This was his final summing up:

"If you had been a boy, and I own I am glad you were not--a man wants a daughter--I should have been quite willing to allow you your flutter on Wall Street, or your try at anything you felt you would like to handle. It would have interested me to look on and see what you were made of, what you wanted, and how you set about trying to get it. It's a new kind of deal you have undertaken. It's more romantic than Wall Street, but I

think I do see what you see in it. Even apart from Rosy and the boy, it would interest me to see what you would do with it. This is your 'flutter.' I like the way you face it. If you were a son instead of a daughter, I should see I might have confidence in you. I could not confide to Wall Street what I will tell you--which is that in the midst of the drive and swirl and tumult of my life here, I like what you see in the thing, I like your idea of the lord of the land, who should love the land and the souls born on it, and be the friend and strength of them and give the best and get it back in fair exchange. There's a steadiness in the thought of such a life among one's kind which has attractions for a man who has spent years in a maelstrom, snatching at what whirls among the eddies of it. Your notes and sketches and summing up of probable costs did us both credit--I say 'both' because your business education is the result of our long talks and journeyings together. You began to train for this when you began going to visit mines and railroads with me at twelve years old. I leave the whole thing in your hands, my girl, I leave Rosy in your hands, and in leaving Rosy to you, you know how I am trusting you with your mother. Your letters to her tell her only what is good for her. She is beginning to look happier and younger already, and is looking forward to the day when Rosy and the boy will come home to visit us, and when we shall go in state to Stornham Court. God bless her, she is made up of affection and simple trust, and that makes it easy to keep things from her. She has never been ill-treated, and she knows I love her, so when I tell her that things are coming right, she never doubts me.

"While you are rebuilding the place you will rebuild Rosy so that the sight of her may not be a pain when her mother sees her again, which is what she is living for."