CHAPTER XXIV

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF STORNHAM

The satin-skinned chestnut was one of the new horses now standing in the Stornham stables. There were several of them--a pair for the landau, saddle horses, smart young cobs for phaeton or dog cart, a pony for Ughtred--the animals necessary at such a place at Stornham. The stables themselves had been quickly put in order, grooms and stable boys kept them as they had not been kept for years. The men learned in a week's time that their work could not be done too well. There were new carriages as well as horses. They had come from London after Lady Anstruthers and her sister returned from town. The horses had been brought down by their grooms--immensely looked after, blanketed, hooded, and altogether cared for as if they were visiting dukes and duchesses. They were all fine, handsome, carefully chosen creatures. When they danced and sidled through the village on their way to the Court, they created a sensation. Whosoever had chosen them had known his business. The older vehicles had been repaired in the village by Tread, and did him credit. Fox had also done his work well.

Plenty more of it had come into their work-shops. Tools to be used on the estate, garden implements, wheelbarrows, lawn rollers, things needed about the house, stables, and cottages, were to be attended to. The church roof was being repaired. Taking all these things and the "doing up" of the Court itself, there was more work than the village could

manage, and carpenters, bricklayers, and decorators were necessarily brought from other places. Still Joe Buttle and Sim Soames were allowed to lead in all such things as lay within their capabilities. It was they who made such a splendid job of the entrance gates and the lodges. It was astonishing how much was done, and how the sense of life in the air--the work of resulting prosperity, made men begin to tread with less listless steps as they went to and from their labour. In the cottages things were being done which made downcast women bestir themselves and look less slatternly. Leaks mended here, windows there, the hopeless copper in the tiny washhouse replaced by a new one, chimneys cured of the habit of smoking, a clean, flowered paper put on a wall, a coat of whitewash--they were small matters, but produced great effect.

Betty had begun to drop into the cottages, and make the acquaintance of their owners. Her first visits, she observed, created great consternation. Women looked frightened or sullen, children stared and refused to speak, clinging to skirts and aprons. She found the atmosphere clear after her second visit. The women began to talk, and the children collected in groups and listened with cheerful grins. She could pick up little Jane's kitten, or give a pat to small Thomas' mongrel dog, in a manner which threw down barriers.

"Don't put out your pipe," she said to old Grandfather Doby, rising totteringly respectful from his chimney-side chair. "You have only just lighted it. You mustn't waste a whole pipeful of tobacco because I have come in."

The old man, grown childish with age, tittered and shuffled and giggled. Such a joke as the grand young lady was having with him. She saw he had only just lighted his pipe. The gentry joked a bit sometimes. But he was afraid of his grandson's wife, who was frowning and shaking her head.

Betty went to him, and put her hand on his arm.

"Sit down," she said, "and I will sit by you." And she sat down and showed him that she had brought a package of tobacco with her, and actually a wonder of a red and yellow jar to hold it, at the sight of which unheard-of joys his rapture was so great that his trembling hands could scarcely clasp his treasures.

"Tee-hee! Tee-hee-ee! Deary me! Thankee--thankee, my lady," he tittered, and he gazed and blinked at her beauty through heavenly tears.

"Nearly a hundred years old, and he has lived on sixteen shillings a week all his life, and earned it by working every hour between sunrise and sunset," Betty said to her sister, when she went home. "A man has one life, and his has passed like that. It is done now, and all the years and work have left nothing in his old hands but his pipe. That's all. I should not like to put it out for him. Who am I that I can buy him a new one, and keep it filled for him until the end? How did it happen? No," suddenly, "I must not lose time in asking myself that. I must get the new pipe."

She did it--a pipe of great magnificence--such as drew to the Doby cottage as many callers as the village could provide, each coming with fevered interest, to look at it--to be allowed to hold and examine it for a few moments, guessing at its probable enormous cost, and returning it reverently, to gaze at Doby with respect--the increase of which can be imagined when it was known that he was not only possessor of the pipe, but of an assurance that he would be supplied with as much tobacco as he could use, to the end of his days. From the time of the advent of the pipe, Grandfather Doby became a man of mark, and his life in the chimney corner a changed thing. A man who owns splendours and unlimited,
excellent shag may like friends to drop in and crack jokes--and even smoke a pipe with him--a common pipe, which, however, is not amiss when excellent shag comes free.

"He lives in a wild whirl of gaiety--a social vortex," said Betty to Lady Anstruthers, after one of her visits. "He is actually rejuvenated. I must order some new white smocks for him to receive his visitors in. Someone brought him an old copy of the Illustrated London News last night. We will send him illustrated papers every week."

In the dull old brain, God knows what spark of life had been relighted. Young Mrs. Doby related with chuckles that granddad had begged that his chair might be dragged to the window, that he might sit and watch the village street. Sitting there, day after day, he smoked and looked at

his pictures, and dozed and dreamed, his pipe and tobacco jar beside him on the window ledge. At any sound of wheels or footsteps his face lighted, and if, by chance, he caught a glimpse of Betty, he tottered to his feet, and stood hurriedly touching his bald forehead with a reverent, palsied hand.

"'Tis 'urr," he would say, enrapt. "I seen 'urr--I did." And young Mrs. Doby knew that this was his joy, and what he waited for as one waits for the coming of the sun.

"'Tis 'urr! 'Tis 'urr!"

The vicar's wife, Mrs. Brent, who since the affair of John Wilson's fire had dropped into the background and felt it indiscreet to present tales of distress at the Court, began to recover her courage. Her perfunctory visits assumed a new character. The vicarage had, of course, called promptly upon Miss Vanderpoel, after her arrival. Mrs. Brent admired Miss Vanderpoel hugely.

"You seem so unlike an American," she said once in her most tactful, ingratiating manner--which was very ingratiating indeed.

"Do I? What is one like when one is like an American? I am one, you know."

"I can scarcely believe it," with sweet ardour.

"Pray try," said Betty with simple brevity, and Mrs. Brent felt that perhaps Miss Vanderpoel was not really very easy to get on with.

"She meant to imply that I did not speak through my nose, and talk too much, and too vivaciously, in a shrill voice," Betty said afterwards, in talking the interview over with Rosy. "I like to convince myself that is not one's sole national characteristic. Also it was not exactly Mrs. Brent's place to kindly encourage me with the information that I do not seem to belong to my own country."

Lady Anstruthers laughed, and Betty looked at her inquiringly.

"You said that just like--just like an Englishwoman."

"Did I?" said Betty.

Mrs. Brent had come to talk to her because she did not wish to trouble dear Lady Anstruthers. Lady Anstruthers already looked much stronger, but she had been delicate so long that one hesitated to distress her with village matters. She did not add that she realised that she was coming to headquarters. The vicar and herself were much disturbed about a rather tiresome old woman--old Mrs. Welden--who lived in a tiny cottage in the village. She was eighty-three years old, and a respectable old person--a widow, who had reared ten children. The children had all grown up, and scattered, and old Mrs. Welden had

nothing whatever to live on. No one knew how she lived, and really she would be better off in the workhouse. She could be sent to Brexley Union, and comfortably taken care of, but she had that singular, obstinate dislike to going, which it was so difficult to manage. She had asked for a shilling a week from the parish, but that could not be allowed her, as it would merely uphold her in her obstinate intention of remaining in her cottage, and taking care of herself--which she could not do. Betty gathered that the shilling a week would be a drain on the parish funds, and would so raise the old creature to affluence that she would feel she could defy fate. And the contumacity of old men and women should not be strengthened by the reckless bestowal of shillings.

Knowing that Miss Vanderpoel had already gained influence among the village people, Mrs. Brent said, she had come to ask her if she would see old Mrs. Welden and argue with her in such a manner as would convince her that the workhouse was the best place for her. It was, of course, so much pleasanter if these old people could be induced to go to Brexley willingly.

"Shall I be undermining the whole Political Economy of Stornham if I take care of her myself?" suggested Betty.

"You--you will lead others to expect the same thing will be done for them."

"When one has resources to draw on," Miss Vanderpoel commented, "in

the case of a woman who has lived eighty-three years and brought up ten children until they were old and strong enough to leave her to take care of herself, it is difficult for the weak of mind to apply the laws of Political Economics. I will go and see old Mrs. Welden."

If the Vanderpoels would provide for all the obstinate old men and women in the parish, the Political Economics of Stornham would proffer no marked objections. "A good many Americans," Mrs. Brent reflected, "seemed to have those odd, lavish ways," as witness Lady Anstruthers herself, on her first introduction to village life. Miss Vanderpoel was evidently a much stronger character, and extremely clever, and somehow the stream of the American fortune was at last being directed towards Stornham--which, of course, should have happened long ago. A good deal was "being done," and the whole situation looked more promising. So was the matter discussed and summed up, the same evening after dinner, at the vicarage.

Betty found old Mrs. Welden's cottage. It was in a green lane, turning from the village street--which was almost a green lane itself. A tiny hedged-in front garden was before the cottage door. A crazy-looking wicket gate was in the hedge, and a fuschia bush and a few old roses were in the few yards of garden. There were actually two or three geraniums in the window, showing cheerful scarlet between the short, white dimity curtains.

"A house this size and of this poverty in an American village," was

Betty's thought, "would be a bare and straggling hideousness, with old tomato cans in the front yard. Here is one of the things we have to learn from them."

When she knocked at the door an old woman opened it. She was a well-preserved and markedly respectable old person, in a decent print frock and a cap. At the sight of her visitor she beamed and made a suggestion of curtsey.

"How do you do, Mrs. Welden?" said Betty. "I am Lady Anstruthers' sister, Miss Vanderpoel. I thought I would like to come and see you."

"Thank you, miss, I am obliged for the kindness, miss. Won't you come in and have a chair?"

There were no signs of decrepitude about her, and she had a cheery old eye. The tiny front room was neat, though there was scarcely space enough in it to contain the table covered with its blue-checked cotton cloth, the narrow sofa, and two or three chairs. There were a few small coloured prints, and a framed photograph or so on the walls, and on the table was a Bible, and a brown earthenware teapot, and a plate.

"Tom Wood's wife, that's neighbour next door to me," she said, "gave me a pinch o' tea--an' I've just been 'avin it. Tom Woods, miss, 'as just been took on by Muster Kedgers as one of the new under gardeners at the Court."

Betty found her delightful. She made no complaints, and was evidently pleased with the excitement of receiving a visitor. The truth was, that in common with every other old woman, she had secretly aspired to being visited some day by the amazing young lady from "Meriker." Betty had yet to learn of the heartburnings which may be occasioned by an unconscious favouritism. She was not aware that when she dropped in to talk to old Doby, his neighbour, old Megworth, peered from behind his curtains, with the dew of envy in his rheumy eyes.

"S'ems," he mumbled, "as if they wasn't nobody now in Stornham village but Gaarge Doby--s'ems not." They were very fierce in their jealousy of attention, and one must beware of rousing evil passions in the octogenarian breast.

The young lady from "Meriker" had not so far had time to make a call at any cottage in old Mrs. Welden's lane--and she had knocked just at old Mrs. Welden's door. This was enough to put in good spirits even a less cheery old person.

At first Betty wondered how she could with delicacy ask personal questions. A few minutes' conversation, however, showed her that the personal affairs of Sir Nigel's tenants were also the affairs of not only himself, but of such of his relatives as attended to their natural duty. Her presence in the cottage, and her interest in Mrs. Welden's ready flow of simple talk, were desirable and proper compliments to the

old woman herself. She was a decent and self-respecting old person, but in her mind there was no faintest glimmer of resentment of questions concerning rent and food and the needs of her simple, hard-driven existence. She had answered such questions on many occasions, when they had not been asked in the manner in which her ladyship's sister asked them. Mrs. Brent had scolded her and "poked about" her cottage, going into her tiny "wash 'us," and up into her infinitesimal bedroom under the slanting roof, to see that they were kept clean. Miss Vanderpoel showed no disposition to "poke." She sat and listened, and made an inquiry here and there, in a nice voice and with a smile in her eyes. There was some pleasure in relating the whole history of your eighty-three years to a young lady who listened as if she wanted to hear it. So old Mrs. Welden prattled on. About her good days, when she was young, and was kitchenmaid at the parsonage in a village twenty miles away; about her marriage with a young farm labourer; about his "steady" habits, and the comfort they had together, in spite of the yearly arrival of a new baby, and the crowding of the bit of a cottage his master allowed them. Ten of 'em, and it had been "up before sunrise, and a good bit of hard work to keep them all fed and clean." But she had not minded that until Jack died quite sudden after a sunstroke. It was odd how much colour her rustic phraseology held. She made Betty see it all. The apparent natural inevitableness of their being turned out of the cottage, because another man must have it; the years during which she worked her way while the ten were growing up, having measles, and chicken pox, and scarlet fever, one dying here and there, dropping out quite in the natural order of things, and being buried by the parish in

corners of the ancient church yard. Three of them "was took" by scarlet fever, then one of a "decline," then one or two by other illnesses. Only four reached man and womanhood. One had gone to Australia, but he never was one to write, and after a year or two, Betty gathered, he had seemed to melt away into the great distance. Two girls had married, and Mrs. Welden could not say they had been "comf'able." They could barely feed themselves and their swarms of children. The other son had never been steady like his father. He had at last gone to London, and London had swallowed him up. Betty was struck by the fact that she did not seem to feel that the mother of ten might have expected some return for her labours, at eighty-three.

Her unresentful acceptance of things was at once significant and moving. Betty found her amazing. What she lived on it was not easy to understand. She seemed rather like a cheerful old bird, getting up each unprovided-for morning, and picking up her sustenance where she found it.

"There's more in the sayin' 'the Lord pervides' than a good many thinks," she said with a small chuckle, marked more by a genial and comfortable sense of humour than by an air of meritoriously quoting the vicar. "He DO."

She paid one and threepence a week in rent for her cottage, and this was the most serious drain upon her resources. She apparently could live without food or fire, but the rent must be paid. "An' I do get a bit

be'ind sometimes," she confessed apologetically, "an' then it's a trouble to get straight."

Her cottage was one of a short row, and she did odd jobs for the women who were her neighbours. There were always babies to be looked after, and "bits of 'elp" needed, sometimes there were "movings" from one cottage to another, and "confinements" were plainly at once exhilarating and enriching. Her temperamental good cheer, combined with her experience, made her a desirable companion and assistant. She was engagingly frank.

"When they're new to it, an' a bit frightened, I just give 'em a cup of 'ot tea, an' joke with 'em to cheer 'em up," she said. "I says to Charles Jenkins' wife, as lives next door, 'come now, me girl, it's been goin' on since Adam an' Eve, an' there's a good many of us left, isn't there?' An' a fine boy it was, too, miss, an' 'er up an' about before 'er month."

She was paid in sixpences and spare shillings, and in cups of tea, or a fresh-baked loaf, or screws of sugar, or even in a garment not yet worn beyond repair. And she was free to run in and out, and grow a flower or so in her garden, and talk with a neighbour over the low dividing hedge.

"They want me to go into the 'Ouse,'" reaching the dangerous subject at last. "They say I'll be took care of an' looked after. But I don't want to do it, miss. I want to keep my bit of a 'ome if I can, an' be free to

come an' go. I'm eighty-three, an' it won't be long. I 'ad a shilling a week from the parish, but they stopped it because they said I ought to go into the 'Ouse.'"

She looked at Betty with a momentarily anxious smile.

"P'raps you don't quite understand, miss," she said. "It'll seem like nothin' to you--a place like this."

"It doesn't," Betty answered, smiling bravely back into the old eyes, though she felt a slight fulness of the throat. "I understand all about it."

It is possible that old Mrs. Welden was a little taken aback by an attitude which, satisfactory to her own prejudices though it might be, was, taken in connection with fixed customs, a trifle unnatural.

"You don't mind me not wantin' to go?" she said.

"No," was the answer, "not at all."

Betty began to ask questions. How much tea, sugar, soap, candles, bread, butter, bacon, could Mrs. Welden use in a week? It was not very easy to find out the exact quantities, as Mrs. Welden's estimates of such things had been based, during her entire existence, upon calculation as to how little, not how much she could use.

When Betty suggested a pound of tea, a half pound--the old woman smiled at the innocent ignorance the suggestion of such reckless profusion implied.

"Oh, no! Bless you, miss, no! I couldn't never do away with it. A quarter, miss--that'd be plenty--a quarter."

Mrs. Welden's idea of "the best," was that at two shillings a pound. Quarter of a pound would cost sixpence (twelve cents, thought Betty). A pound of sugar would be twopence, Mrs. Welden would use half a pound (the riotous extravagance of two cents). Half a pound of butter, "Good tub butter, miss," would be ten pence three farthings a pound. Soap, candles, bacon, bread, coal, wood, in the quantities required by Mrs. Welden, might, with the addition of rent, amount to the dizzying height of eight or ten shillings.

"With careful extravagance," Betty mentally summed up, "I might spend almost two dollars a week in surrounding her with a riot of luxury."

She made a list of the things, and added some extras as an idea of her own. Life had not afforded her this kind of thing before, she realised. She felt for the first time the joy of reckless extravagance, and thrilled with the excitement of it.

"You need not think of Brexley Union any more," she said, when she,

having risen to go, stood at the cottage door with old Mrs. Welden. "The things I have written down here shall be sent to you every Saturday night. I will pay your rent."

"Miss--miss!" Mrs. Welden looked affrighted. "It's too much, miss. An' coals eighteen pence a hundred!"

"Never mind," said her ladyship's sister, and the old woman, looking up into her eyes, found there the colour Mount Dunstan had thought of as being that of bluebells under water. "I think we can manage it, Mrs. Welden. Keep yourself as warm as you like, and sometime I will come and have a cup of tea with you and see if the tea is good."

"Oh! Deary me!" said Mrs. Welden. "I can't think what to say, miss. It lifts everythin'--everythin'. It's not to be believed. It's like bein' left a fortune."

When the wicket gate swung to and the young lady went up the lane, the old woman stood staring after her. And here was a piece of news to run into Charley Jenkins' cottage and tell--and what woman or man in the row would quite believe it?