CHAPTER XXV

"WE BEGAN TO MARRY THEM, MY GOOD FELLOW!"

Lord Dunholm and his eldest son, Lord Westholt, sauntered together smoking their after-dinner cigars on the broad-turfed terrace overlooking park and gardens which seemed to sweep without boundary line into the purplish land beyond. The grey mass of the castle stood clear-cut against the blue of a sky whose twilight was still almost daylight, though in the purity of its evening stillness a star already hung, here and there, and a young moon swung low. The great spaces about them held a silence whose exquisite entirety was marked at intervals by the distant bark of a shepherd dog driving his master's sheep to the fold, their soft, intermittent plaints--the mother ewes' mellow answering to the tender, fretful lambs--floated on the air, a lovely part of the ending day's repose. Where two who are friends stroll together at such hours, the great beauty makes for silence or for thoughtful talk. These two men--father and son--were friends and intimates, and had been so from Westholt's first memory of the time when his childish individuality began to detach itself from the background of misty and indistinct things. They had liked each other, and their liking and intimacy had increased with the onward moving and change of years. After sixty sane and decently spent active years of life, Lord Dunholm, in either country tweed or evening dress, was a well-built and handsome man; at thirty-three his son was still like him.

"Have you seen her?" he was saying.

"Only at a distance. She was driving Lady Anstruthers across the marshes in a cart. She drove well and----" he laughed as he flicked the ash from his cigar--"the back of her head and shoulders looked handsome."

"The American young woman is at present a factor which is without doubt to be counted with," Lord Dunholm put the matter without lightness. "Any young woman is a factor, but the American young woman just now--just now----" He paused a moment as though considering. "It did not seem at all necessary to count with them at first, when they began to appear among us. They were generally curiously exotic, funny little creatures with odd manners and voices. They were often most amusing, and one liked to hear them chatter and see the airy lightness with which they took superfluous, and sometimes unsuperfluous, conventions, as a hunter takes a five-barred gate. But it never occurred to us to marry them. We did not take them seriously enough. But we began to marry them--we began to marry them, my good fellow!"

The final words broke forth with such a suggestion of sudden anxiety that, in spite of himself, Westholt laughed involuntarily, and his father, turning to look at him, laughed also. But he recovered his seriousness.

"It was all rather a muddle at first," he went on. "Things were not fairly done, and certain bad lots looked on it as a paying scheme on the

one side, while it was a matter of silly, little ambitions on the other. But that it is an extraordinary country there is no sane denying--huge, fabulously resourceful in every way--area, variety of climate, wealth of minerals, products of all sorts, soil to grow anything, and sun and rain enough to give each thing what it needs; last, or rather first, a people who, considered as a nation, are in the riot of youth, and who began by being English--which we Englishmen have an innocent belief is the one method of 'owning the earth.' That figure of speech is an Americanism I carefully committed to memory. Well, after all, look at the map--look at the map! There we are."

They had frequently discussed together the question of the development of international relations. Lord Dunholm, a man of far-reaching and clear logic, had realised that the oddly unaccentuated growth of intercourse between the two countries might be a subject to be reflected on without lightness.

"The habit we have of regarding America and Americans as rather a joke," he had once said, "has a sort of parallel in the condescendingly amiable amusement of a parent at the precocity or whimsicalness of a child. But the child is shooting up amazingly--amazingly. In a way which suggests divers possibilities."

The exchange of visits between Dunholm and Stornham had been rare and formal. From the call made upon the younger Lady Anstruthers on her marriage, the Dunholms had returned with a sense of puzzled pity for the

little American bride, with her wonderful frock and her uneasy, childish eyes. For some years Lady Anstruthers had been too delicate to make or return calls. One heard painful accounts of her apparent wretched ill-health and of the condition of her husband's estate.

"As the relations between the two families have evidently been strained for years," Lord Dunholm said, "it is interesting to hear of the sudden advent of the sister. It seems to point to reconciliation. And you say the girl is an unusual person.

"From what one hears, she would be unusual if she were an English girl who had spent her life on an English estate. That an American who is making her first visit to England should seem to see at once the practical needs of a neglected place is a thing to wonder at. What can she know about it, one thinks. But she apparently does know. They say she has made no mistakes--even with the village people. She is managing, in one way or another, to give work to every man who wants it. Result, of course--unbounded rustic enthusiasm."

Lord Dunholm laughed between the soothing whiffs of his cigar.

"How clever of her! And what sensible good feeling! Yes--yes! She evidently has learned things somewhere. Perhaps New York has found it wise to begin to give young women professional training in the management of English estates. Who knows? Not a bad idea."

It was the rustic enthusiasm, Westholt explained, which had in a manner spread her fame. One heard enlightening and illustrative anecdotes of her. He related several well worth hearing. She had evidently a sense of humour and unexpected perceptions.

"One detail of the story of old Doby's meerschaum," Westholt said, "pleased me enormously. She managed to convey to him--without hurting his aged feelings or overwhelming him with embarrassment--that if he preferred a clean churchwarden or his old briarwood, he need not feel obliged to smoke the new pipe. He could regard it as a trophy. Now, how did she do that without filling him with fright and confusion, lest she might think him not sufficiently grateful for her present? But they tell me she did it, and that old Doby is rapturously happy and takes the meerschaum to bed with him, but only smokes it on Sundays--sitting at his window blowing great clouds when his neighbours are coming from church. It was a clever girl who knew that an old fellow might secretly like his old pipe best."

"It was a deliciously clever girl," said Lord Dunholm. "One wants to know and make friends with her. We must drive over and call. I confess, I rather congratulate myself that Anstruthers is not at home."

"So do I," Westholt answered. "One wonders a little how far he and his sister-in-law will 'foregather' when he returns. He's an unpleasant beggar."

A few days later Mrs. Brent, returning from a call on Mrs. Charley Jenkins, was passed by a carriage whose liveries she recognised half way up the village street. It was the carriage from Dunholm Castle. Lord and Lady Dunholm and Lord Westholt sat in it. They were, of course, going to call at the Court. Miss Vanderpoel was beginning to draw people. She naturally would. She would be likely to make quite a difference in the neighbourhood now that it had heard of her and Lady Anstruthers had been seen driving with her, evidently no longer an unvisitable invalid, but actually decently clothed and in her right mind. Mrs. Brent slackened her steps that she might have the pleasure of receiving and responding gracefully to salutations from the important personages in the landau. She felt that the Dunholms were important. There were earldoms AND earldoms, and that of Dunholm was dignified and of distinction.

A common-looking young man on a bicycle, who had wheeled into the village with the carriage, riding alongside it for a hundred yards or so, stopped before the Clock Inn and dismounted, just as Mrs. Brent neared him. He saw her looking after the equipage, and lifting his cap spoke to her civilly.

"This is Stornham village, ain't it, ma'am?" he inquired.

"Yes, my man." His costume and general aspect seemed to indicate that he was of the class one addressed as "my man," though there was something a little odd about him.

"Thank you. That wasn't Miss Vanderpoel's eldest sister in that carriage, was it?"

"Miss Vanderpoel's----" Mrs. Brent hesitated. "Do you mean Lady Anstruthers?"

"I'd forgotten her name. I know Miss Vanderpoel's eldest sister lives at Stornham--Reuben S. Vanderpoel's daughter."

"Lady Anstruthers' younger sister is a Miss Vanderpoel, and she is visiting at Stornham Court now." Mrs. Brent could not help adding, curiously, "Why do you ask?"

"I am going to see her. I'm an American."

Mrs. Brent coughed to cover a slight gasp. She had heard remarkable things of the democratic customs of America. It was painful not to be able to ask questions.

"The lady in the carriage was the Countess of Dunholm," she said rather grandly. "They are going to the Court to call on Miss Vanderpoel."

"Then Miss Vanderpoel's there yet. That's all right. Thank you, ma'am," and lifting his cap again he turned into the little public house.

The Dunholm party had been accustomed on their rare visits to Stornham

to be received by the kind of man-servant in the kind of livery which is a manifest, though unwilling, confession. The men who threw open the doors were of regulation height, well dressed, and of trained bearing. The entrance hall had lost its hopeless shabbiness. It was a complete and picturesquely luxurious thing. The change suggested magic. The magic which had been used, Lord Dunholm reflected, was the simplest and most powerful on earth. Given surroundings, combined with a gift for knowing values of form and colour, if you have the power to spend thousands of guineas on tiger skins, Oriental rugs, and other beauties, barrenness is easily transformed.

The drawing-room wore a changed aspect, and at a first glance it was to be seen that in poor little Lady Anstruthers, as she had generally been called, there was to be noted alteration also. In her case the change, being in its first stages, could not perhaps be yet called transformation, but, aided by softly pretty arrangement of dress and hair, a light in her eyes, and a suggestion of pink under her skin, one recalled that she had once been a pretty little woman, and that after all she was only about thirty-two years old.

That her sister, Miss Vanderpoel, had beauty, it was not necessary to hesitate in deciding. Neither Lord Dunholm nor his wife nor their son did hesitate. A girl with long limbs an alluring profile, and extraordinary black lashes set round lovely Irish-blue eyes, possesses physical capital not to be argued about.

She was not one of the curious, exotic little creatures, whose thin, though sometimes rather sweet, and always gay, high-pitched young voices Lord Dunholm had been so especially struck by in the early days of the American invasion. Her voice had a tone one would be likely to remember with pleasure. How well she moved--how well her black head was set on her neck! Yes, she was of the new type--the later generation.

These amazing, oddly practical people had evolved it--planned it, perhaps, bought--figuratively speaking--the architects and material to design and build it--bought them in whatever country they found them, England, France, Italy Germany--pocketing them coolly and carrying them back home to develop, complete, and send forth into the world when their invention was a perfected thing. Struck by the humour of his fancy, Lord Dunholm found himself smiling into the Irish-blue eyes. They smiled back at him in a way which warmed his heart. There were no pauses in the conversation which followed. In times past, calls at Stornham had generally held painfully blank moments. Lady Dunholm was as pleased as her husband. A really charming girl was an enormous acquisition to the neighbourhood.

Westholt, his father saw, had found even more than the story of old Doby's pipe had prepared him to expect.

Country calls were not usually interesting or stimulating, and this one was. Lord Dunholm laid subtly brilliant plans to lead Miss Vanderpoel to talk of her native land and her views of it. He knew that she would say

things worth hearing. Incidentally one gathered picturesque detail. To have vibrated between the two continents since her thirteenth year, to have spent a few years at school in one country, a few years in another, and yet a few years more in still another, as part of an arranged educational plan; to have crossed the Atlantic for the holidays, and to have journeyed thousands of miles with her father in his private car; to make the visits of a man of great schemes to his possessions of mines, railroads, and lands which were almost principalities--these things had been merely details of her life, adding interest and variety, it was true, but seeming the merely normal outcome of existence. They were normal to Vanderpoels and others of their class who were abnormalities in themselves when compared with the rest of the world.

Her own very lack of any abnormality reached, in Lord Dunholm's mind, the highest point of illustration of the phase of life she beautifully represented--for beautiful he felt its rare charms were.

When they strolled out to look at the gardens he found talk with her no less a stimulating thing. She told her story of Kedgers, and showed the chosen spot where thickets of lilies were to bloom, with the giants lifting white archangel trumpets above them in the centre.

"He can be trusted," she said. "I feel sure he can be trusted. He loves them. He could not love them so much and not be able to take care of them." And as she looked at him in frank appeal for sympathy, Lord Dunholm felt that for the moment she looked like a tall, queenly child.

But pleased as he was, he presently gave up his place at her side to Westholt. He must not be a selfish old fellow and monopolise her. He hoped they would see each other often, he said charmingly. He thought she would be sure to like Dunholm, which was really a thoroughly English old place, marked by all the features she seemed so much attracted by. There were some beautiful relics of the past there, and some rather shocking ones--certain dungeons, for instance, and a gallows mount, on which in good old times the family gallows had stood. This had apparently been a working adjunct to the domestic arrangements of every respectable family, and that irritating persons should dangle from it had been a simple domestic necessity, if one were to believe old stories.

"It was then that nobles were regarded with respect," he said, with his fine smile. "In the days when a man appeared with clang of arms and with javelins and spears before, and donjon keeps in the background, the attitude of bent knees and awful reverence were the inevitable results. When one could hang a servant on one's own private gallows, or chop off his hand for irreverence or disobedience--obedience and reverence were a rule. Now, a month's notice is the extremity of punishment, and the old pomp of armed servitors suggests comic opera. But we can show you relics of it at Dunholm."

He joined his wife and began at once to make himself so delightful to Rosy that she ceased to be afraid of him, and ended by talking almost

gaily of her London visit.

Betty and Westholt walked together. The afternoon being lovely, they had all sauntered into the park to look at certain views, and the sun was shining between the trees. Betty thought the young man almost as charming as his father, which was saying much. She had fallen wholly in love with Lord Dunholm--with his handsome, elderly face, his voice, his erect bearing, his fine smile, his attraction of manner, his courteous ease and wit. He was one of the men who stood for the best of all they had been born to represent. Her own father, she felt, stood for the best of all such an American as himself should be. Lord Westholt would in time be what his father was. He had inherited from him good looks, good feeling, and a sense of humour. Yes, he had been given from the outset all that the other man had been denied. She was thinking of Mount Dunstan as "the other man," and spoke of him.

"You know Lord Mount Dunstan?" she said.

Westholt hesitated slightly.

"Yes--and no," he answered, after the hesitation. "No one knows him very well. You have not met him?" with a touch of surprise in his tone.

"He was a passenger on the Meridiana when I last crossed the Atlantic. There was a slight accident and we were thrown together for a few moments. Afterwards I met him by chance again. I did not know who he

was."

Lord Westholt showed signs of hesitation anew. In fact, he was rather disturbed. She evidently did not know anything whatever of the Mount Dunstans. She would not be likely to hear the details of the scandal which had obliterated them, as it were, from the decent world.

The present man, though he had not openly been mixed up with the hideous thing, had borne the brand because he had not proved himself to possess any qualities likely to recommend him. It was generally understood that he was a bad lot also. To such a man the allurements such a young woman as Miss Vanderpoel would present would be extraordinary. It was unfortunate that she should have been thrown in his way. At the same time it was not possible to state the case clearly during one's first call on a beautiful stranger.

"His going to America was rather spirited," said the mellow voice beside him. "I thought only Americans took their fates in their hands in that way. For a man of his class to face a rancher's life means determination. It means the spirit----" with a low little laugh at the leap of her imagination--"of the men who were Mount Dunstans in early days and went forth to fight for what they meant to have. He went to fight. He ought to have won. He will win some day."

"I do not know about fighting," Lord Westholt answered. Had the fellow been telling her romantic stories? "The general impression was that he

went to America to amuse himself."

"No, he did not do that," said Betty, with simple finality. "A sheep ranch is not amusing----" She stopped short and stood still for a moment. They had been walking down the avenue, and she stopped because her eyes had been caught by a figure half sitting, half lying in the middle of the road, a prostrate bicycle near it. It was the figure of a cheaply dressed young man, who, as she looked, seemed to make an ineffectual effort to rise.

"Is that man ill?" she exclaimed. "I think he must be." They went towards him at once, and when they reached him he lifted a dazed white face, down which a stream of blood was trickling from a cut on his forehead. He was, in fact, very white indeed, and did not seem to know what he was doing.

"I am afraid you are hurt," Betty said, and as she spoke the rest of the party joined them. The young man vacantly smiled, and making an unconscious-looking pass across his face with his hand, smeared the blood over his features painfully. Betty kneeled down, and drawing out her handkerchief, lightly wiped the gruesome smears away. Lord Westholt saw what had happened, having given a look at the bicycle.

"His chain broke as he was coming down the incline, and as he fell he got a nasty knock on this stone," touching with his foot a rather large one, which had evidently fallen from some cartload of building material.

The young man, still vacantly smiling, was fumbling at his breast pocket. He began to talk incoherently in good, nasal New York, at the mere sound of which Lady Anstruthers made a little yearning step forward.

"Superior any other," he muttered. "Tabulator spacer--marginal release key--call your 'tention--instantly--'justable--Delkoff--no equal on market." And having found what he had fumbled for, he handed a card to Miss Vanderpoel and sank unconscious on her breast.

"Let me support him, Miss Vanderpoel," said Westholt, starting forward.

"Never mind, thank you," said Betty. "If he has fainted I suppose he must be laid flat on the ground. Will you please to read the card."

It was the card Mount Dunstan had read the day before.

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"He is probably G. Selden," said Westholt. "Travelling in the interests

of his firm, poor chap. The clue is not of much immediate use, however."

They were fortunately not far from the house, and Westholt went back quickly to summon servants and send for the village doctor. The Dunholms were kindly sympathetic, and each of the party lent a handkerchief to staunch the bleeding. Lord Dunholm helped Miss Vanderpoel to lay the young man down carefully.

"I am afraid," he said; "I am really afraid his leg is broken. It was twisted under him. What can be done with him?"

Miss Vanderpoel looked at her sister.

"Will you allow him to be carried to the house temporarily, Rosy?" she asked. "There is apparently nothing else to be done."

"Yes, yes," said Lady Anstruthers. "How could one send him away, poor fellow! Let him be carried to the house."

Miss Vanderpoel smiled into Lord Dunholm's much approving, elderly eyes.

"G. Selden is a compatriot," she said. "Perhaps he heard I was here and came to sell me a typewriter."

Lord Westholt returning with two footmen and a light mattress, G. Selden was carried with cautious care to the house. The afternoon sun,

breaking through the branches of the ancestral oaks, kindly touched his keen-featured, white young face. Lord Dunholm and Lord Westholt each lent a friendly hand, and Miss Vanderpoel, keeping near, once or twice wiped away an insistent trickle of blood which showed itself from beneath the handkerchiefs. Lady Dunholm followed with Lady Anstruthers.

Afterwards, during his convalescence, G. Selden frequently felt with regret that by his unconsciousness of the dignity of his cortege at the moment he had missed feeling himself to be for once in a position he would have designated as "out of sight" in the novelty of its importance. To have beheld him, borne by nobles and liveried menials, accompanied by ladies of title, up the avenue of an English park on his way to be cared for in baronial halls, would, he knew, have added a joy to the final moments of his grandmother, which the consolations of religion could scarcely have met equally in competition. His own point of view, however, would not, it is true, have been that of the old woman in the black net cap and purple ribbons, but of a less reverent nature. His enjoyment, in fact, would have been based upon that transatlantic sense of humour, whose soul is glee at the incompatible, which would have been full fed by the incongruity of "Little Willie being yanked along by a bunch of earls, and Reuben S. Vanderpoel's daughters following the funeral." That he himself should have been unconscious of the situation seemed to him like "throwing away money."

The doctor arriving after he had been put to bed found slight concussion of the brain and a broken leg. With Lady Anstruthers' kind permission,

it would certainly be best that he should remain for the present where he was. So, in a bedroom whose windows looked out upon spreading lawns and broad-branched trees, he was as comfortably established as was possible. G. Selden, through the capricious intervention of Fate, if he had not "got next" to Reuben S. Vanderpoel himself, had most undisputably "got next" to his favourite daughter.

As the Dunholm carriage rolled down the avenue there reigned for a few minutes a reflective silence. It was Lady Dunholm who broke it. "That," she said in her softly decided voice, "that is a nice girl."

Lord Dunholm's agreeable, humorous smile flickered into evidence.

"That is it," he said. "Thank you, Eleanor, for supplying me with a quite delightful early Victorian word. I believe I wanted it. She is a beauty and she is clever. She is a number of other things--but she is also a nice girl. If you will allow me to say so, I have fallen in love with her."

"If you will allow me to say so," put in Westholt, "so have I--quite fatally."

"That," said his father, with speculation in his eye, "is more serious."