

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### SETTING THEM THINKING

Old Doby, sitting at his open window, with his pipe and illustrated papers on the table by his side, began to find life a series of thrills. The advantage of a window giving upon the village street unspeakably increased. For many years he had preferred the chimney corner greatly, and had rejoiced at the drawing in of winter days when a fire must be well kept up, and a man might bend over it, and rub his hands slowly gazing into the red coals or little pointed flames which seemed the only things alive and worthy the watching. The flames were blue at the base and yellow at the top, and jumped looking merry, and caught at bits of black coal, and set them crackling and throwing off splinters till they were ablaze and as much alive as the rest. A man could get comfort and entertainment therefrom. There was naught else so good to live with. Nothing happened in the street, and every dull face that passed was an old story, and told an old tale of stupefying hard labour and hard days.

But now the window was a better place to sit near. Carts went by with men whistling as they walked by the horses heads. Loads of things wanted for work at the Court. New faces passed faces of workmen--sometimes grinning, "impudent youngsters," who larked with the young women, and called out to them as they passed their cottages, if a good-looking one was loitering about her garden gate. Old Doby chuckled at their love-making chaff, remembering dimly that seventy years ago he had been

just as proper a young chap, and had made love in the same way. Lord, Lord, yes! He had been a bold young chap as ever winked an eye. Then, too, there were the vans, heavy-loaded and closed, and coming along slowly. Every few days, at first, there had come a van from "Lunnon." Going to the Court, of course. And to sit there, and hear the women talk about what might be in them, and to try to guess one's self, that was a rare pastime. Fine things going to the Court these days--furniture and grandeur filling up the shabby or empty old rooms, and making them look like other big houses--same as Westerbridge even, so the women said. The women were always talking and getting bits of news somehow, and were beginning to be worth listening to, because they had something more interesting to talk about than children's worn-out shoes, and whooping cough.

Doby heard everything first from them. "Dang the women, they always knowed things fust." It was them as knowed about the smart carriages as began to roll through the one village street. They were gentry's carriages, with fine, stamping horses, and jingling silver harness, and big coachmen, and tall footmen, and such like had long ago dropped off showing themselves at Stornham.

"But now the gentry has heard about Miss Vanderpoel, and what's being done at the Court, and they know what it means," said young Mrs. Doby. "And they want to see her, and find out what she's like. It's her brings them."

Old Doby chuckled and rubbed his hands. He knew what she was like. That straight, slim back of hers, and the thick twist of black hair, and the way she had of laughing at you, as cheery as if a bell was ringing. Aye, he knew all about that.

"When they see her once, they'll come agen, for sure," he quavered shrilly, and day by day he watched for the grand carriages with vivid eagerness. If a day or two passed without his seeing one, he grew fretful, and was injured, feeling that his beauty was being neglected! "None to-day, nor yet yest'day," he would cackle. "What be they folk a-doin'?"

Old Mrs. Welden, having heard of the pipe, and come to see it, had struck up an acquaintance with him, and dropped in almost every day to talk and sit at his window. She was a young thing, by comparison, and could bring him lively news, and, indeed, so stir him up with her gossip that he was in danger of becoming a young thing himself. Her groceries and his tobacco were subjects whose interest was undying.

A great curiosity had been awakened in the county, and visitors came from distances greater than such as ordinarily include usual calls. Naturally, one was curious about the daughter of the Vanderpoel who was a sort of national institution in his own country. His name had not been so much heard of in England when Lady Anstruthers had arrived but there had, at first, been felt an interest in her. But she had been a failure--a childish-looking girl--whose thin, fair, prettiness had no

distinction, and who was obviously overwhelmed by her surroundings. She had evidently had no influence over Sir Nigel, and had not been able to prevent his making ducks and drakes of her money, which of course ought to have been spent on the estate. Besides which a married woman represented fewer potentialities than a handsome unmarried girl entitled to expectations from huge American wealth.

So the carriages came and came again, and, stately or unstately far-off neighbours sat at tea upon the lawn under the trees, and it was observed that the methods and appointments of the Court had entirely changed. Nothing looked new and American. The silently moving men-servants could not have been improved upon, there was plainly an excellent chef somewhere, and the massive silver was old and wonderful. Upon everybody's word, the change was such as it was worth a long drive merely to see!

The most wonderful thing, however, was Lady Anstruthers herself. She had begun to grow delicately plump, her once drawn and haggard face had rounded out, her skin had smoothed, and was actually becoming pink and fair, a nimbus of pale fine hair puffed airily over her forehead, and she wore the most charming little clothes, all of which made her look fifteen years younger than she had seemed when, on the grounds of ill-health, she had retired into seclusion. The renewed relations with her family, the atmosphere by which she was surrounded, had evidently given her a fresh lease of life, and awakened in her a new courage.

When the summer epidemic of garden parties broke forth, old Doby gleefully beheld, day after day, the Court carriage drive by bearing her ladyship and her sister attired in fairest shades and tints "same as if they was flowers." Their delicate vaporousness, and rare colours, were sweet delights to the old man, and he and Mrs. Welden spent happy evenings discussing them as personal possessions. To these two Betty WAS a personal possession, bestowing upon them a marked distinction. They were hers and she was theirs. No one else so owned her. Heaven had given her to them that their last years might be lighted with splendour.

On her way to one of the garden parties she stopped the carriage before old Doby's cottage, and went in to him to speak a few words. She was of pale convolvulus blue that afternoon, and Doby, standing up touching his forelock and Mrs. Welden curtsyng, gazed at her with prayer in their eyes. She had a few flowers in her hand, and a book of coloured photographs of Venice.

"These are pictures of the city I told you about--the city built in the sea--where the streets are water. You and Mrs. Welden can look at them together," she said, as she laid flowers and book down. "I am going to Dunholm Castle to a garden party this afternoon. Some day I will come and tell you about it."

The two were at the window staring spellbound, as she swept back to the carriage between the sweet-williams and Canterbury bells bordering the narrow garden path.

"Do you know I really went in to let them see my dress," she said, when she rejoined Lady Anstruthers. "Old Doby's granddaughter told me that he and Mrs. Welden have little quarrels about the colours I wear. It seems that they find my wardrobe an absorbing interest. When I put the book on the table, I felt Doby touch my sleeve with his trembling old hand. He thought I did not know."

"What will they do with Venice?" asked Rosy.

"They will believe the water is as blue as the photographs make it--and the palaces as pink. It will seem like a chapter out of Revelations, which they can believe is true and not merely 'Scriptur,'--because I have been there. I wish I had been to the City of the Gates of Pearl, and could tell them about that."

On the lawns at the garden parties she was much gazed at and commented upon. Her height and her long slender neck held her head above those of other girls, the dense black of her hair made a rich note of shadow amid the prevailing English blondness. Her mere colouring set her apart. Rosy used to watch her with tender wonder, recalling her memory of nine-year-old Betty, with the long slim legs and the demanding and accusing child-eyes. She had always been this creature even in those far-off days. At the garden party at Dunholm Castle it became evident that she was, after a manner, unusually the central figure of the occasion. It was not at all surprising, people said to each other.

Nothing could have been more desirable for Lord Westholt. He combined rank with fortune, and the Vanderpoel wealth almost constituted rank in itself. Both Lord and Lady Dunholm seemed pleased with the girl. Lord Dunholm showed her great attention. When she took part in the dancing on the lawn, he looked on delightedly. He walked about the gardens with her, and it was plain to see that their conversation was not the ordinary polite effort to accord, usually marking the talk between a mature man and a merely pretty girl. Lord Dunholm sometimes laughed with unfeigned delight, and sometimes the two seemed to talk of grave things.

"Such occasions as these are a sort of yearly taking of the social census of the county," Lord Dunholm explained. "One invites ALL one's neighbours and is invited again. It is a friendly duty one owes."

"I do not see Lord Mount Dunstan," Betty answered. "Is he here?"

She had never denied to herself her interest in Mount Dunstan, and she had looked for him. Lord Dunholm hesitated a second, as his son had done at Miss Vanderpoel's mention of the tabooed name. But, being an older man, he felt more at liberty to speak, and gave her a rather long kind look.

"My dear young lady," he said, "did you expect to see him here?"

"Yes, I think I did," Betty replied, with slow softness. "I believe I

rather hoped I should."

"Indeed! You are interested in him?"

"I know him very little. But I am interested. I will tell you why."

She paused by a seat beneath a tree, and they sat down together.

She gave, with a few swift vivid touches, a sketch of the red-haired second-class passenger on the Meridiana, of whom she had only thought that he was an unhappy, rough-looking young man, until the brief moment in which they had stood face to face, each comprehending that the other was to be relied on if the worst should come to the worst. She had understood his prompt disappearance from the scene, and had liked it.

When she related the incident of her meeting with him when she thought him a mere keeper on his own lands, Lord Dunholm listened with a changed and thoughtful expression. The effect produced upon her imagination by what she had seen, her silent wandering through the sad beauty of the wronged place, led by the man who tried stiffly to bear himself as a servant, his unintended self-revelations, her clear, well-argued point of view charmed him. She had seen the thing set apart from its county scandal, and so had read possibilities others had been blind to. He was immensely touched by certain things she said about the First Man.

"He is one of them," she said. "They find their way in the end--they find their way. But just now he thinks there is none. He is standing in the dark--where the roads meet."



"You think he will find his way?" Lord Dunholm said. "Why do you think so?"

"Because I KNOW he will," she answered. "But I cannot tell you WHY I know."

"What you have said has been interesting to me, because of the light your own thought threw upon what you saw. It has not been Mount Dunstan

I have been caring for, but for the light you saw him in. You met him without prejudice, and you carried the light in your hand. You always carry a light, my impression is," very quietly. "Some women do."

"The prejudice you speak of must be a bitter thing for a proud man to bear. Is it a just prejudice? What has he done?"

Lord Dunholm was gravely silent for a few moments.

"It is an extraordinary thing to reflect,"--his words came slowly--"that it may NOT be a just prejudice. I do not know that he has done anything--but seem rather sulky, and be the son of his father, and the brother of his brother."

"And go to America," said Betty. "He could have avoided doing that--but he cannot be called to account for his relations. If that is all--the

prejudice is NOT just."

"No, it is not," said Lord Dunholm, "and one feels rather awkward at having shared it. You have set me thinking again, Miss Vanderpoel."