

CHAPTER XXXII

A GREAT BALL

A certain great ball, given yearly at Dunholm Castle, was one of the most notable social features of the county. It took place when the house was full of its most interestingly distinguished guests, and, though other balls might be given at other times, this one was marked by a degree of greater state. On several occasions the chief guests had been great personages indeed, and to be bidden to meet them implied a selection flattering in itself. One's invitation must convey by inference that one was either brilliant, beautiful, or admirable, if not important.

Nigel Anstruthers had never appeared at what the uninvited were wont, with derisive smiles, to call The Great Panjandrum Function--which was an ironic designation not employed by such persons as received cards bidding them to the festivity. Stornham Court was not popular in the county; no one had yearned for the society of the Dowager Lady Anstruthers, even in her youth; and a not too well-favoured young man with an ill-favoured temper, noticeably on the lookout for grievances, is not an addition to one's circle. At nineteen Nigel had discovered the older Lord Mount Dunstan and his son Tenham to be congenial acquaintances, and had been so often absent from home that his neighbours would have found social intercourse with him difficult, even if desirable. Accordingly, when the county paper recorded the splendours

of The Great Panjandrum Function--which it by no means mentioned by that

name--the list of "Among those present" had not so far contained the name of Sir Nigel Anstruthers.

So, on a morning a few days after his return, the master of Stornham turned over a card of invitation and read it several times before speaking.

"I suppose you know what this means," he said at last to Rosalie, who was alone with him.

"It means that we are invited to Dunholm Castle for the ball, doesn't it?"

Her husband tossed the card aside on the table.

"It means that Betty will be invited to every house where there is a son who must be disposed of profitably.

"She is invited because she is beautiful and clever. She would be invited if she had no money at all," said Rosy daringly. She was actually growing daring, she thought sometimes. It would not have been possible to say anything like this a few months ago.

"Don't make silly mistakes," said Nigel. "There are a good many handsome

girls who receive comparatively little attention. But the hounds of war are let loose, when one of your swollen American fortunes appears. The obviousness of it 'virtuously' makes me sick. It's as vulgar--as New York."

What befel next brought to Sir Nigel a shock of curious enlightenment, but no one was more amazed than Rosy herself. She felt, when she heard her own voice, as if she must be rather mad.

"I would rather," she said quite distinctly, "that you did not speak to me of New York in that way."

"What!" said Anstruthers, staring at her with contempt which was derision.

"It is my home," she answered. "It is not proper that I should hear it spoken of slightly."

"Your home! It has not taken the slightest notice of you for twelve years. Your people dropped you as if you were a hot potato."

"They have taken me up again." Still in amazement at her own boldness, but somehow learning something as she went on.

He walked over to her side, and stood before her.

"Look here, Rosalie," he said. "You have been taking lessons from your sister. She is a beauty and young and you are not. People will stand things from her they will not take from you. I would stand some things myself, because it rather amuses a man to see a fine girl peacocking. It's merely ridiculous in you, and I won't stand it--not a bit of it."

It was not specially fortunate for him that the door opened as he was speaking, and Betty came in with her own invitation in her hand. He was quick enough, however, to turn to greet her with a shrug of his shoulders.

"I am being favoured with a little scene by my wife," he explained. "She is capable of getting up excellent little scenes, but I daresay she does not show you that side of her temper."

Betty took a comfortable chintz-covered, easy chair. Her expression was evasively speculative.

"Was it a scene I interrupted?" she said. "Then I must not go away and leave you to finish it. You were saying that you would not 'stand' something. What does a man do when he will not 'stand' a thing? It always sounds so final and appalling--as if he were threatening horrible things such as, perhaps, were a resource in feudal times. What IS the resource in these dull days of law and order--and policemen?"

"Is this American chaff?" he was disagreeably conscious that he was not

wholly successful in his effort to be lofty.

The frankness of Betty's smile was quite without prejudice.

"Dear me, no," she said. "It is only the unpicturesque result of an unfeminine knowledge of the law. And I was thinking how one is limited--and yet how things are simplified after all."

"Simplified!" disgustedly.

"Yes, really. You see, if Rosy were violent she could not beat you--even if she were strong enough--because you could ring the bell and give her into custody. And you could not beat her because the same unpleasant thing would happen to you. Policemen do rob things of colour, don't they? And besides, when one remembers that mere vulgar law insists that no one can be forced to live with another person who is brutal or loathsome, that's simple, isn't it? You could go away from Rosy," with sweet clearness, "at any moment you wished--as far away as you liked."

"You seem to forget," still feeling that convincing loftiness was not easy, "that when a man leaves his wife, or she deserts him, it is she who is likely to be called upon to bear the onus of public opinion."

"Would she be called upon to bear it under all circumstances?"

"Damned clever woman as you are, you know that she would, as well as I

know it." He made an abrupt gesture with his hand. "You know that what I say is true. Women who take to their heels are deucedly unpopular in England."

"I have not been long in England, but I have been struck by the prevalence of a sort of constitutional British sense of fair play among the people who really count. The Dunholms, for instance, have it markedly. In America it is the men who force women to take to their heels who are deucedly unpopular. The Americans' sense of fair play is their most English quality. It was brought over in ships by the first colonists--like the pieces of fine solid old furniture, one even now sees, here and there, in houses in Virginia."

"But the fact remains," said Nigel, with an unpleasant laugh, "the fact remains, my dear girl."

"The fact that does remain," said Betty, not unpleasantly at all, and still with her gentle air of mere unprejudiced speculation, "is that, if a man or woman is properly ill-treated--PROPERLY--not in any amateurish way--they reach the point of not caring in the least--nothing matters, but that they must get away from the horror of the unbearable thing --never to see or hear of it again is heaven enough to make anything else a thing to smile at. But one could settle the other point by experimenting. Suppose you run away from Rosy, and then we can see if she is cut by the county."

His laugh was unpleasant again.

"So long as you are with her, she will not be cut. There are a number of penniless young men of family in this, as well as the adjoining, counties. Do you think Mount Dunstan would cut her?"

She looked down at the carpet thoughtfully a moment, and then lifted her eyes.

"I do not think so," she answered. "But I will ask him."

He was startled by a sudden feeling that she might be capable of it.

"Oh, come now," he said, "that goes beyond a joke. You will not do any such absurd thing. One does not want one's domestic difficulties discussed by one's neighbours."

Betty opened coolly surprised eyes.

"I did not understand it was a personal matter," she remarked. "Where do the domestic difficulties come in?"

He stared at her a few seconds with the look she did not like, which was less likeable at the moment, because it combined itself with other things.

"Hang it," he muttered. "I wish I could keep my temper as you can keep yours," and he turned on his heel and left the room.

Rosy had not spoken. She had sat with her hands in her lap, looking out of the window. She had at first had a moment of terror. She had, indeed, once uttered in her soul the abject cry: "Don't make him angry, Betty--oh, don't, don't!" And suddenly it had been stilled, and she had listened. This was because she realised that Nigel himself was listening. That made her see what she had not dared to allow herself to see before. These trite things were true. There were laws to protect one. If Betty had not been dealing with mere truths, Nigel would have stopped her. He had been supercilious, but he could not contradict her.

"Betty," she said, when her sister came to her, "you said that to show ME things, as well as to show them to him. I knew you did, and listened to every word. It was good for me to hear you."

"Clear-cut, unadorned facts are like bullets," said Betty. "They reach home, if one's aim is good. The shiftiest people cannot evade them."

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A certain thing became evident to Betty during the time which elapsed between the arrival of the invitations and the great ball. Despite an obvious intention to assume an amiable pose for the time being, Sir Nigel could not conceal a not quite unexplainable antipathy to one

individual. This individual was Mount Dunstan, whom it did not seem easy for him to leave alone. He seemed to recur to him as a subject, without any special reason, and this somewhat puzzled Betty until she heard from Rosalie of his intimacy with Lord Tenham, which, in a measure, explained it. The whole truth was that "The Lout," as he had been called, had indulged in frank speech in his rare intercourse with his brother and his friends, and had once interfered with hot young fury in a matter in which the pair had specially wished to avoid all interference. His open scorn of their methods of entertaining themselves they had felt to be disgusting impudence, which would have been deservedly punished with a horsewhip, if the youngster had not been a big-muscled, clumsy oaf, with a dangerous eye. Upon this footing their acquaintance had stood in past years, and to decide--as Sir Nigel had decided--that the oaf in question had begun to make his bid for splendid fortune under the roof of Stornham Court itself was a thing not to be regarded calmly. It was more than he could stand, and the folly of temper, which was forever his undoing, betrayed him into mistakes more than once. This girl, with her beauty and her wealth, he chose to regard as a sort of property rightfully his own. She was his sister-in-law, at least; she was living under his roof; he had more or less the power to encourage or discourage such aspirants as appeared. Upon the whole there was something soothing to one's vanity in appearing before the world as the person at present responsible for her. It gave a man a certain dignity of position, and his chief girding at fate had always risen from the fact that he had not had dignity of position. He would not be held cheap in this matter, at least. But sometimes, as he looked at the girl he turned hot and sick,

as it was driven home to him that he was no longer young, that he had never been good-looking, and that he had cut the ground from under his feet twelve years ago, when he had married Rosalie! If he could have waited--if he could have done several other things--perhaps the clever acting of a part, and his power of domination might have given him a chance. Even that blackguard of a Mount Dunstan had a better one now. He was young, at least, and free--and a big strong beast. He was forced, with bitter reluctance, to admit that he himself was not even particularly strong--of late he had felt it hideously.

So he detested Mount Dunstan the more for increasing reasons, as he thought the matter over. It would seem, perhaps, but a subtle pleasure to the normal mind, but to him there was pleasure--support--aggrandisement--in referring to the ill case of the Mount Dunstan estate, in relating illustrative anecdotes, in dwelling upon the hopelessness of the outlook, and the notable unpopularity of the man himself. A confiding young lady from the States was required, he said on one occasion, but it would be necessary that she should be a young person of much simplicity, who would not be alarmed or chilled by the obvious. No one would realise this more clearly than Mount Dunstan himself. He said it coldly and casually, as if it were the simplest matter of fact. If the fellow had been making himself agreeable to Betty, it was as well that certain points should be--as it were inadvertently--brought before her.

Miss Vanderpoel was really rather fine, people said to each other

afterwards, when she entered the ballroom at Dunholm Castle with her brother-in-law. She bore herself as composedly as if she had been escorted by the most admirable and dignified of conservative relatives, instead of by a man who was more definitely disliked and disapproved of than any other man in the county whom decent people were likely to meet. Yet, she was far too clever a girl not to realise the situation clearly, they said to each other. She had arrived in England to find her sister a neglected wreck, her fortune squandered, and her existence stripped bare of even such things as one felt to be the mere decencies. There was but one thing to be deduced from the facts which had stared her in the face. But of her deductions she had said nothing whatever, which was, of course, remarkable in a young person. It may be mentioned that, perhaps, there had been those who would not have been reluctant to hear what she must have had to say, and who had even possibly given her a delicate lead. But the lead had never been taken. One lady had even remarked that, on her part, she felt that a too great reserve verged upon secretiveness, which was not a desirable girlish quality.

Of course the situation had been so much discussed that people were naturally on the lookout for the arrival of the Stornham party, as it was known that Sir Nigel had returned home, and would be likely to present himself with his wife and sister-in-law. There was not a dowager present who did not know how and where he had reprehensibly spent the last months. It served him quite right that the Spanish dancing person had coolly left him in the lurch for a younger and more attractive, as well as a richer man. If it were not for Miss Vanderpoel, one need not

pretend that one knew nothing about the affair--in fact, if it had not been for Miss Vanderpoel, he would not have received an invitation--and poor Lady Anstruthers would be sitting at home, still the forlorn little frump and invalid she had so wonderfully ceased to be since her sister had taken her in hand. She was absolutely growing even pretty and young, and her clothes were really beautiful. The whole thing was amazing.

Betty, as well as Rosalie and Nigel--knew that many people turned undisguisedly to look at them--even to watch them as they came into the splendid ballroom. It was a splendid ballroom and a stately one, and Lord Dunholm and Lord Westholt shared a certain thought when they met her, which was that hers was distinctly the proud young brilliance of presence which figured most perfectly against its background. Much as people wanted to look at Sir Nigel, their eyes were drawn from him to Miss Vanderpoel. After all it was she who made him an object of interest. One wanted to know what she would do with him--how she would "carry him off." How much did she know of the distaste people felt for him, since she would not talk or encourage talk? The Dunholms could not have invited her and her sister, and have ignored him; but did she not guess that they would have ignored him, if they could? and was there not natural embarrassment in feeling forced to appear in pomp, as it were, under his escort?

But no embarrassment was perceptible. Her manner committed her to no recognition of a shadow of a flaw in the character of her companion. It

even carried a certain conviction with it, and the lookers-on felt the impossibility of suggesting any such flaw by their own manner. For this evening, at least, the man must actually be treated as if he were an entirely unobjectionable person. It appeared as if that was what the girl wanted, and intended should happen.

This was what Nigel himself had begun to perceive, but he did not put it pleasantly. Deucedly clever girl as she was, he said to himself, she saw that it would be more agreeable to have no nonsense talked, and no ruffling of tempers. He had always been able to convey to people that the ruffling of his temper was a thing to be avoided, and perhaps she had already been sharp enough to realise this was a fact to be counted with. She was sharp enough, he said to himself, to see anything.

The function was a superb one. The house was superb, the rooms of entertainment were in every proportion perfect, and were quite renowned for the beauty of the space they offered; the people themselves were, through centuries of dignified living, so placed that intercourse with their kind was an easy and delightful thing. They need never doubt either their own effect, or the effect of their hospitalities. Sir Nigel saw about him all the people who held enviable place in the county. Some of them he had never known, some of them had long ceased to recall his existence. There were those among them who lifted lorgnettes or stuck monocles into their eyes as he passed, asking each other in politely subdued tones who the man was who seemed to be in attendance on Miss Vanderpoel. Nigel knew this and girded at it internally, while he made

the most of his suave smile.

The distinguished personage who was the chief guest was to be seen at the upper end of the room talking to a tall man with broad shoulders, who was plainly interesting him for the moment. As the Stornham party passed on, this person, making his bow, retired, and, as he turned towards them, Sir Nigel recognising him, the agreeable smile was for the moment lost.

"How in the name of Heaven did Mount Dunstan come here?" broke from him with involuntary heat.

"Would it be rash to conclude," said Betty, as she returned the bow of a very grand old lady in black velvet and an imposing tiara, "that he came in response to invitation?"

The very grand old lady seemed pleased to see her, and, with a royal little sign, called her to her side. As Betty Vanderpoel was a great success with the Mrs. Weldens and old Dobys of village life, she was also a success among grand old ladies. When she stood before them there was a delicate submission in her air which was suggestive of obedience to the dignity of their years and state. Strongly conservative and rather feudal old persons were much pleased by this. In the present irreverent iconoclasm of modern times, it was most agreeable to talk to a handsome creature who was as beautifully attentive as if she had been

a specially perfect young lady-in-waiting.

This one even patted Betty's hand a little, when she took it. She was a great county potentate, who was known as Lady Alanby of Dole--her house being one of the most ancient and interesting in England.

"I am glad to see you here to-night," she said. "You are looking very nice. But you cannot help that."

Betty asked permission to present her sister and brother-in-law. Lady Alanby was polite to both of them, but she gave Nigel a rather sharp glance through her gold pince-nez as she greeted him.

"Janey and Mary," she said to the two girls nearest her, "I daresay you will kindly change your chairs and let Lady Anstruthers and Miss Vanderpoel sit next to me."

The Ladies Jane and Mary Lithcom, who had been ordered about by her from

their infancy, obeyed with polite smiles. They were not particularly pretty girls, and were of the indigent noble. Jane, who had almost overlarge blue eyes, sighed as she reseated herself a few chairs lower down.

"It does seem beastly unfair," she said in a low voice to her sister, "that a girl such as that should be so awfully good-looking. She ought

to have a turned-up nose."

"Thank you," said Mary, "I have a turned-up nose myself, and I've got nothing to balance it."

"Oh, I didn't mean a nice turned-up nose like yours," said Jane; "I meant an ugly one. Of course Lady Alanby wants her for Tommy." And her manner was not resigned.

"What she, or anyone else for that matter," disdainfully, "could want with Tommy, I don't know," replied Mary.

"I do," answered Jane obstinately. "I played cricket with him when I was eight, and I've liked him ever since. It is AWFUL," in a smothered outburst, "what girls like us have to suffer."

Lady Mary turned to look at her curiously.

"Jane," she said, "are you SUFFERING about Tommy?"

"Yes, I am. Oh, what a question to ask in a ballroom! Do you want me to burst out crying?"

"No," sharply, "look at the Prince. Stare at that fat woman curtsying to him. Stare and then wink your eyes."

Lady Alanby was talking about Mount Dunstan.

"Lord Dunholm has given us a lead. He is an old friend of mine, and he has been talking to me about it. It appears that he has been looking into things seriously. Modern as he is, he rather tilts at injustices, in a quiet way. He has satisfactorily convinced himself that Lord Mount Dunstan has been suffering for the sins of the fathers--which must be annoying."

"Is Lord Dunholm quite sure of that?" put in Sir Nigel, with a suggestively civil air.

Old Lady Alanby gave him an unencouraging look.

"Quite," she said. "He would be likely to be before he took any steps."

"Ah," remarked Nigel. "I knew Lord Tenham, you see."

Lady Alanby's look was more unencouraging still. She quietly and openly put up her glass and stared. There were times when she had not the remotest objection to being rude to certain people.

"I am sorry to hear that," she observed. "There never was any room for mistake about Tenham. He is not usually mentioned."

"I do not think this man would be usually mentioned, if everything were

known," said Nigel.

Then an appalling thing happened. Lady Alanby gazed at him a few seconds, and made no reply whatever. She dropped her glass, and turned again to talk to Betty. It was as if she had turned her back on him, and Sir Nigel, still wearing an amiable exterior, used internally some bad language.

"But I was a fool to speak of Tenham," he thought. "A great fool."

A little later Miss Vanderpoel made her curtsy to the exalted guest, and was commented upon again by those who looked on. It was not at all unnatural that one should find ones eyes following a girl who, representing a sort of royal power, should have the good fortune of possessing such looks and bearing.

Remembering his child bete noir of the long legs and square, audacious little face, Nigel Anstruthers found himself restraining a slight grin as he looked on at her dancing. Partners flocked about her like bees, and Lady Alanby of Dole, and other very grand old or middle-aged ladies all found the evening more interesting because they could watch her.

"She is full of spirit," said Lady Alanby, "and she enjoys herself as a girl should. It is a pleasure to look at her. I like a girl who gets a magnificent colour and stars in her eyes when she dances. It looks healthy and young."

It was Tommy Miss Vanderpoel was dancing with when her ladyship said this. Tommy was her grandson and a young man of greater rank than fortune. He was a nice, frank, heavy youth, who loved a simple county life spent in tramping about with guns, and in friendly hobnobbing with the neighbours, and eating great afternoon teas with people whose jokes were easy to understand, and who were ready to laugh if you tried a joke yourself. He liked girls, and especially he liked Jane Lithcom, but that was a weakness his grandmother did not at all encourage, and, as he danced with Betty Vanderpoel, he looked over her shoulder more than once at a pair of big, unhappy blue eyes, whose owner sat against the wall.

Betty Vanderpoel herself was not thinking of Tommy. In fact, during this brilliant evening she faced still further developments of her own strange case. Certain new things were happening to her. When she had entered the ballroom she had known at once who the man was who stood before the royal guest--she had known before he bowed low and withdrew. And her recognition had brought with it a shock of joy. For a few moments her throat felt hot and pulsing. It was true--the things which concerned him concerned her. All that happened to him suddenly became her affair, as if in some way they were of the same blood. Nigel's slighting of him had infuriated her; that Lord Dunholm had offered him friendship and hospitality was a thing which seemed done to herself, and filled her with gratitude and affection; that he should be at this place, on this special occasion, swept away dark things from his path. It was as if it were stated without words that a conservative man of the

world, who knew things as they were, having means of reaching truths, vouched for him and placed his dignity and firmness at his side.

And there was the gladness at the sight of him. It was an overpoweringly strong thing. She had never known anything like it. She had not seen him since Nigel's return, and here he was, and she knew that her life quickened in her because they were together in the same room. He had come to them and said a few courteous words, but he had soon gone away. At first she wondered if it was because of Nigel, who at the time was making himself rather ostentatiously amiable to her. Afterwards she saw him dancing, talking, being presented to people, being, with a tactful easiness, taken care of by his host and hostess, and Lord Westholt. She was struck by the graceful magic with which this tactful ease surrounded him without any obviousness. The Dunholms had given a lead, as Lady Alanby had said, and the rest were following it and ignoring intervals with reposeful readiness. It was wonderfully well done. Apparently there had been no past at all. All began with this large young man, who, despite his Viking type, really looked particularly well in evening dress. Lady Alanby held him by her chair for some time, openly enjoying her talk with him, and calling up Tommy, that they might make friends.

After a while, Betty said to herself, he would come and ask for a dance. But he did not come, and she danced with one man after another. Westholt came to her several times and had more dances than one. Why did the other not come? Several times they whirled past each other, and when it occurred they looked--both feeling it an accident--into each other's

eyes.

The strong and strange thing--that which moves on its way as do birth and death, and the rising and setting of the sun--had begun to move in them. It was no new and rare thing, but an ancient and common one--as common and ancient as death and birth themselves; and part of the law as they are. As it comes to royal persons to whom one makes obeisance at their mere passing by, as it comes to scullery maids in royal kitchens, and grooms in royal stables, as it comes to ladies-in-waiting and the women who serve them, so it had come to these two who had been drawn near to each other from the opposite sides of the earth, and each started at the touch of it, and withdrew a pace in bewilderment, and some fear.

"I wish," Mount Dunstan was feeling throughout the evening, "that her eyes had some fault in their expression--that they drew one less--that they drew ME less. I am losing my head."

"It would be better," Betty thought, "if I did not wish so much that he would come and ask me to dance with him--that he would not keep away so. He is keeping away for a reason. Why is he doing it?"

The music swung on in lovely measures, and the dancers swung with it. Sir Nigel walked dutifully through the Lancers once with his wife, and once with his beautiful sister-in-law. Lady Anstruthers, in her new bloom, had not lacked partners, who discovered that she was a childishly

light creature who danced extremely well. Everyone was kind to her, and the very grand old ladies, who admired Betty, were absolutely benign in their manner. Betty's partners paid ingenuous court to her, and Sir Nigel found he had not been mistaken in his estimate of the dignity his position of escort and male relation gave to him.

Rosy, standing for a moment looking out on the brilliancy and state about her, meeting Betty's eyes, laughed quiveringly.

"I am in a dream," she said.

"You have awakened from a dream," Betty answered.

From the opposite side of the room someone was coming towards them, and, seeing him, Rosy smiled in welcome.

"I am sure Lord Mount Dunstan is coming to ask you to dance with him," she said. "Why have you not danced with him before, Betty?"

"He has not asked me," Betty answered. "That is the only reason."

"Lord Dunholm and Lord Westholt called at the Mount a few days after they met him at Stornham," Rosalie explained in an undertone. "They wanted to know him. Then it seems they found they liked each other. Lady Dunholm has been telling me about it. She says Lord Dunholm thanks you, because you said something illuminating. That was the word she

used--'illuminating.' I believe you are always illuminating, Betty."

Mount Dunstan was certainly coming to them. How broad his shoulders looked in his close-fitting black coat, how well built his whole strong body was, and how steadily he held his eyes! Here and there one sees a man or woman who is, through some trick of fate, by nature a compelling thing unconsciously demanding that one should submit to some domineering

attraction. One does not call it domineering, but it is so. This special creature is charged unfairly with more than his or her single share of force. Betty Vanderpoel thought this out as this "other one" came to her. He did not use the ballroom formula when he spoke to her. He said in rather a low voice:

"Will you dance with me?"

"Yes," she answered.

Lord Dunholm and his wife agreed afterwards that so noticeable a pair had never before danced together in their ballroom. Certainly no pair had ever been watched with quite the same interested curiosity. Some onlookers thought it singular that they should dance together at all, some pleased themselves by reflecting on the fact that no other two could have represented with such picturesqueness the opposite poles of fate and circumstance. No one attempted to deny that they were an extraordinarily striking-looking couple, and that one's eyes followed

them in spite of one's self.

"Taken together they produce an effect that is somehow rather amazing," old Lady Alanby commented. "He is a magnificently built man, you know, and she is a magnificently built girl. Everybody should look like that. My impression would be that Adam and Eve did, but for the fact that neither of them had any particular character. That affair of the apple was so silly. Eve has always struck me as being the kind of woman who, if she lived to-day, would run up stupid bills at her dressmakers and be afraid to tell her husband. That wonderful black head of Miss Vanderpoel's looks very nice poised near Mount Dunstan's dark red one."

"I am glad to be dancing with him," Betty was thinking. "I am glad to be near him."

"Will you dance this with me to the very end," asked Mount Dunstan--"to the very late note?"

"Yes," answered Betty.

He had spoken in a low but level voice--the kind of voice whose tone places a man and woman alone together, and wholly apart from all others by whomsoever they are surrounded. There had been no preliminary speech and no explanation of the request followed. The music was a perfect thing, the brilliant, lofty ballroom, the beauty of colour and sound about them, the jewels and fair faces, the warm breath of flowers in

the air, the very sense of royal presence and its accompanying state and ceremony, seemed merely a naturally arranged background for the strange consciousness each held close and silently--knowing nothing of the mind of the other.

This was what was passing through the man's mind.

"This is the thing which most men experience several times during their lives. It would be reason enough for all the great deeds and all the crimes one hears of. It is an enormous kind of anguish and a fearful kind of joy. It is scarcely to be borne, and yet, at this moment, I could kill myself and her, at the thought of losing it. If I had begun earlier, would it have been easier? No, it would not. With me it is bound to go hard. At twenty I should probably not have been able to keep myself from shouting it aloud, and I should not have known that it was only the working of the Law. 'Only!' Good God, what a fool I am! It is because it is only the Law that I cannot escape, and must go on to the end, grinding my teeth together because I cannot speak. Oh, her smooth young cheek! Oh, the deep shadows of her lashes! And while we sway round and round together, I hold her slim strong body in the hollow of my arm."

It was, quite possibly, as he thought this that Nigel Anstruthers, following him with his eyes as he passed, began to frown. He had been watching the pair as others had, he had seen what others saw, and now he had an idea that he saw something more, and it was something which did

not please him. The instinct of the male bestirred itself--the curious instinct of resentment against another man--any other man. And, in this case, Mount Dunstan was not any other man, but one for whom his antipathy was personal.

"I won't have that," he said to himself. "I won't have it."

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The music rose and swelled, and then sank into soft breathing, as they moved in harmony together, gliding and swirling as they threaded their way among other couples who swirled and glided also, some of them light and smiling, some exchanging low-toned speech--perhaps saying words which, unheard by others, touched on deep things. The exalted guest fell into momentary silence as he looked on, being a man much attracted by physical fineness and temperamental power and charm. A girl like that would bring a great deal to a man and to the country he belonged to. A great race might be founded on such superbness of physique and health and beauty. Combined with abnormal resources, certainly no more could be asked. He expressed something of the kind to Lord Dunholm, who stood near him in attendance.

To herself Betty was saying: "That was a strange thing he asked me. It is curious that we say so little. I should never know much about him. I have no intelligence where he is concerned--only a strong, stupid feeling, which is not like a feeling of my own. I am no longer Betty

Vanderpoel--and I wish to go on dancing with him--on and on--to the last note, as he said."

She felt a little hot wave run over her cheek uncomfortably, and the next instant the big arm tightened its clasp of her--for just one second--not more than one. She did not know that he, himself, had seen the sudden ripple of red colour, and that the equally sudden contraction of the arm had been as unexpected to him and as involuntary as the quick wave itself. It had horrified and made him angry. He looked the next instant entirely stiff and cold.

"He did not know it happened," Betty resolved.

"The music is going to stop," said Mount Dunstan. "I know the waltz. We can get once round the room again before the final chord. It was to be the last note--the very last," but he said it quite rigidly, and Betty laughed.

"Quite the last," she answered.

The music hastened a little, and their gliding whirl became more rapid--a little faster--a little faster still--a running sweep of notes, a big, terminating harmony, and the thing was over.

"Thank you," said Mount Dunstan. "One will have it to remember." And his tone was slightly sardonic.

"Yes," Betty acquiesced politely.

"Oh, not you. Only I. I have never waltzed before."

Betty turned to look at him curiously.

"Under circumstances such as these," he explained. "I learned to dance at a particularly hideous boys' school in France. I abhorred it. And the trend of my life has made it quite easy for me to keep my twelve-year-old vow that I would never dance after I left the place, unless I WANTED to do it, and that, especially, nothing should make me waltz until certain agreeable conditions were fulfilled. Waltzing I approved of--out of hideous schools. I was a pig-headed, objectionable child. I detested myself even, then."

Betty's composure returned to her.

"I am trusting," she remarked, "that I may secretly regard myself as one of the agreeable conditions to be fulfilled. Do not dispel my hopes roughly."

"I will not," he answered. "You are, in fact, several of them."

"One breathes with much greater freedom," she responded.

This sort of cool nonsense was safe. It dispelled feelings of tenseness, and carried them to the place where Sir Nigel and Lady Anstruthers awaited them. A slight stir was beginning to be felt throughout the ballroom. The royal guest was retiring, and soon the rest began to melt away. The Anstruthers, who had a long return drive before them, were among those who went first.

When Lady Anstruthers and her sister returned from the cloak room, they found Sir Nigel standing near Mount Dunstan, who was going also, and talking to him in an amiably detached manner. Mount Dunstan, himself, did not look amiable, or seem to be saying much, but Sir Nigel showed no signs of being disturbed.

"Now that you have ceased to forswear the world," he said as his wife approached, "I hope we shall see you at Stornham. Your visits must not cease because we cannot offer you G. Selden any longer."

He had his own reasons for giving the invitation--several of them. And there was a satisfaction in letting the fellow know, casually, that he was not in the ridiculous position of being unaware of what had occurred during his absence--that there had been visits--and also the objectionable episode of the American bounder. That the episode had been objectionable, he knew he had adroitly conveyed by mere tone and manner.

Mount Dunstan thanked him in the usual formula, and then spoke to Betty.

"G. Selden left us tremulous and fevered with ecstatic anticipation. He carried your kind letter to Mr. Vanderpoel, next to his heart. His brain seemed to whirl at the thought of what 'the boys' would say, when he arrived with it in New York. You have materialised the dream of his life!"

"I have interested my father," Betty answered, with a brilliant smile.

"He liked the romance of the Reuben S. Vanderpoel who rewarded the saver of his life by unbounded orders for the Delkoff."

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As their carriage drove away, Sir Nigel bent forward to look out of the window, and having done it, laughed a little.

"Mount Dunstan does not play the game well," he remarked.

It was annoying that neither Betty nor his wife inquired what the game in question might be, and that his temperament forced him into explaining without encouragement.

"He should have 'stood motionless with folded arms,' or something of the sort, and 'watched her equipage until it was out of sight.'"

"And he did not?" said Betty

"He turned on his heel as soon as the door was shut."

"People ought not to do such things," was her simple comment. To which it seemed useless to reply.