CHAPTER XXXIV

RED GODWYN

Stornham Court had taken its proper position in the county as a place which was equal to social exchange in the matter of entertainment. Sir Nigel and Lady Anstruthers had given a garden party, according to the decrees of the law obtaining in country neighbourhoods. The curiosity to behold Miss Vanderpoel, and the change which had been worked in the well-known desolation and disrepair, precluded the possibility of the refusal of any invitations sent, the recipient being in his or her right mind, and sound in wind and limb. That astonishing things had been accomplished, and that the party was a successful affair, could not but be accepted as truths. Garden parties had been heard of, were a trifle repetitional, and even dull, but at this one there was real music and real dancing, and clever entertainments were given at intervals in a green-embowered little theatre, erected for the occasion. These were agreeable additions to mere food and conversation, which were capable of palling.

To the garden party the Anstruthers did not confine themselves. There were dinner parties at Stornham, and they also were successful functions. The guests were of those who make for the success of such entertainments.

"I called upon Mount Dunstan this afternoon," Sir Nigel said one

evening, before the first of these dinners. "He might expect it, as one is asking him to dine. I wish him to be asked. The Dunholms have taken him up so tremendously that no festivity seems complete without him."

He had been invited to the garden party, and had appeared, but Betty had seen little of him. It is easy to see little of a guest at an out-of-door festivity. In assisting Rosalie to attend to her visitors she had been much occupied, but she had known that she might have seen more of him, if he had intended that it should be so. He did not--for reasons of his own--intend that it should be so, and this she became aware of. So she walked, played in the bowling green, danced and talked with Westholt, Tommy Alanby and others.

"He does not want to talk to me. He will not, if he can avoid it," was what she said to herself.

She saw that he rather sought out Mary Lithcom, who was not accustomed to receiving special attention. The two walked together, danced together, and in adjoining chairs watched the performance in the embowered theatre. Lady Mary enjoyed her companion very much, but she wondered why he had attached himself to her.

Betty Vanderpoel asked herself what they talked to each other about, and did not suspect the truth, which was that they talked a good deal of herself.

"Have you seen much of Miss Vanderpoel?" Lady Mary had begun by asking.

"I have SEEN her a good deal, as no doubt you have."

Lady Mary's plain face expressed a somewhat touched reflectiveness.

"Do you know," she said, "that the garden parties have been a different thing this whole summer, just because one always knew one would see her at them?"

A short laugh from Mount Dunstan.

"Jane and I have gone to every garden party within twenty miles, ever since we left the schoolroom. And we are very tired of them. But this year we have quite cheered up. When we are dressing to go to something dull, we say to each other, 'Well, at any rate, Miss Vanderpoel will be there, and we shall see what she has on, and how her things are made,' and that's something--besides the fun of watching people make up to her, and hearing them talk about the men who want to marry her, and wonder which one she will take. She will not take anyone in this place," the nice turned-up nose slightly suggesting a derisive sniff. "Who is there who is suitable?"

Mount Dunstan laughed shortly again.

"How do you know I am not an aspirant myself?" he said. He had a

mirthless sense of enjoyment in his own brazenness. Only he himself knew how brazen the speech was.

Lady Mary looked at him with entire composure.

"I am quite sure you are not an aspirant for anybody. And I happen to know that you dislike moneyed international marriages. You are so obviously British that, even if I had not been told that, I should know it was true. Miss Vanderpoel herself knows it is true."

"Does she?"

"Lady Alanby spoke of it to Sir Nigel, and I heard Sir Nigel tell her."

"Exactly the kind of unnecessary thing he would be likely to repeat." He cast the subject aside as if it were a worthless superfluity and went on: "When you say there is no one suitable, you surely forget Lord Westholt."

"Yes, it's true I forgot him for the moment. But--" with a laugh--"one rather feels as if she would require a royal duke or something of that sort."

"You think she expects that kind of thing?" rather indifferently.

"She? She doesn't think of the subject. She simply thinks of other

things--of Lady Anstruthers and Ughtred, of the work at Stornham and the village life, which gives her new emotions and interest. She also thinks about being nice to people. She is nicer than any girl I know."

"You feel, however, she has a right to expect it?" still without more than a casual air of interest.

"Well, what do you feel yourself?" said Lady Mary. "Women who look like that--even when they are not millionairesses--usually marry whom they choose. I do not believe that the two beautiful Miss Gunnings rolled into one would have made anything as undeniable as she is. One has seen portraits of them. Look at her as she stands there talking to Tommy and Lord Dunholm!"

Internally Mount Dunstan was saying: "I am looking at her, thank you," and setting his teeth a little.

But Lady Mary was launched upon a subject which swept her along with it, and she--so to speak--ground the thing in.

"Look at the turn of her head! Look at her mouth and chin, and her eyes with the lashes sweeping over them when she looks down! You must have noticed the effect when she lifts them suddenly to look at you. It's so odd and lovely that it--it almost----"

"Almost makes you jump," ended Mount Dunstan drily.

She did not laugh and, in fact, her expression became rather sympathetically serious.

"Ah," she said, "I believe you feel a sort of rebellion against the unfairness of the way things are dealt out. It does seem unfair, of course. It would be perfectly disgraceful--if she were different. I had moments of almost hating her until one day not long ago she did something so bewitchingly kind and understanding of other people's feelings that I gave up. It was clever, too," with a laugh, "clever and daring. If she were a young man she would make a dashing soldier."

She did not give him the details of the story, but went on to say in effect what she had said to Betty herself of the inevitable incidentalness of her stay in the country. If she had not evidently come to Stornham this year with a purpose, she would have spent the season in London and done the usual thing. Americans were generally presented promptly, if they had any position--sometimes when they had not. Lady Alanby had heard that the fact that she was with her sister had awakened curiosity and people were talking about her.

"Lady Alanby said in that dry way of hers that the arrival of an unmarried American fortune in England was becoming rather like the visit of an unmarried royalty. People ask each other what it means and begin to arrange for it. So far, only the women have come, but Lady Alanby says that is because the men have had no time to do anything but stay

at home and make the fortunes. She believes that in another generation there will be a male leisure class, and then it will swoop down too, and marry people. She was very sharp and amusing about it. She said it would help them to rid themselves of a plethora of wealth and keep them from bursting."

She was an amiable, if unsentimental person, Mary Lithcom--and was, quite without ill nature, expressing the consensus of public opinion. These young women came to the country with something practical to exchange in these days, and as there were men who had certain equivalents to offer, so also there were men who had none, and whom decency should cause to stand aside. Mount Dunstan knew that when she had said, "Who is there who is suitable?" any shadow of a thought of himself as being in the running had not crossed her mind. And this was not only for the reasons she had had the ready composure to name, but for one less conquerable.

Later, having left Mary Lithcom, he decided to take a turn by himself. He had done his duty as a masculine guest. He had conversed with young women and old ones, had danced, visited gardens and greenhouses, and taken his part in all things. Also he had, in fact, reached a point when a few minutes of solitude seemed a good thing. He found himself turning into the clipped laurel walk, where Tommy Alanby had stood with Jane Lithcom, and he went to the end of it and stood looking out on the view.

"Look at the turn of her head," Lady Mary had said. "Look at her mouth

and chin." And he had been looking at them the whole afternoon, not because he had intended to do so, but because it was not possible to prevent himself from doing it.

This was one of the ironies of fate. Orthodox doctrine might suggest that it was to teach him that his past rebellion had been undue. Orthodox doctrine was ever ready with these soothing little explanations. He had raged and sulked at Destiny, and now he had been given something to rage for.

"No one knows anything about it until it takes him by the throat," he was thinking, "and until it happens to a man he has no right to complain. I was not starving before. I was not hungering and thirsting--in sight of food and water. I suppose one of the most awful things in the world is to feel this and know it is no use."

He was not in the condition to reason calmly enough to see that there might be one chance in a thousand that it was of use. At such times the most intelligent of men and women lose balance and mental perspicacity. A certain degree of unreasoning madness possesses them. They see too much and too little. There were, it was true, a thousand chances against him, but there was one for him--the chance that selection might be on his side. He had not that balance of thought left which might have suggested to him that he was a man young and powerful, and filled with an immense passion which might count for something. All he saw was that he was notably in the position of the men whom he had privately

disdained when they helped themselves by marriage. Such marriages he had held were insults to the manhood of any man and the womanhood of any woman. In such unions neither party could respect himself or his companion. They must always in secret doubt each other, fret at themselves, feel distaste for the whole thing. Even if a man loved such a woman, and the feeling was mutual, to whom would it occur to believe it--to see that they were not gross and contemptible? To no one. Would it have occurred to himself that such an extenuating circumstance was possible? Certainly it would not. Pig-headed pride and obstinacy it might be, but he could not yet face even the mere thought of it--even if his whole position had not been grotesque. Because, after all, it was grotesque that he should even argue with himself. She--before his eyes and the eyes of all others--the most desirable of women; people dinning it in one's ears that she was surrounded by besiegers who waited for her to hold out her sceptre, and he--well, what was he! Not that his mental attitude was that of a meek and humble lover who felt himself unworthy and prostrated himself before her shrine with prayers--he was, on the contrary, a stout and obstinate Briton finding his stubbornly-held beliefs made as naught by a certain obsession--an intolerable longing which wakened with him in the morning, which sank into troubled sleep with him at night--the longing to see her, to speak to her, to stand near her, to breathe the air of her. And possessed by this--full of the overpowering strength of it--was a man likely to go to a woman and say, "Give your life and desirableness to me; and incidentally support me, feed me, clothe me, keep the roof over my head, as if I were an impotent beggar"?

"No, by God!" he said. "If she thinks of me at all it shall be as a man. No, by God, I will not sink to that!"

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A moving touch of colour caught his eye. It was the rose of a parasol seen above the laurel hedge, as someone turned into the walk. He knew the colour of it and expected to see other parasols and hear voices. But there was no sound, and unaccompanied, the wonderful rose-thing moved towards him.

"The usual things are happening to me," was his thought as it advanced. "I am hot and cold, and just now my heart leaped like a rabbit. It would be wise to walk off, but I shall not do it. I shall stay here, because I am no longer a reasoning being. I suppose that a horse who refuses to back out of his stall when his stable is on fire feels something of the same thing."

When she saw him she made an involuntary-looking pause, and then recovering herself, came forward.

"I seem to have come in search of you," she said. "You ought to be showing someone the view really--and so ought I."

"Shall we show it to each other?" was his reply.

"Yes." And she sat down on the stone seat which had been placed for the comfort of view lovers. "I am a little tired--just enough to feel that to slink away for a moment alone would be agreeable. It IS slinking to leave Rosalie to battle with half the county. But I shall only stay a few minutes."

She sat still and gazed at the beautiful lands spread before her, but there was no stillness in her mind, neither was there stillness in his. He did not look at the view, but at her, and he was asking himself what he should be saying to her if he were such a man as Westholt. Though he had boldness enough, he knew that no man--even though he is free to speak the best and most passionate thoughts of his soul--could be sure that he would gain what he desired. The good fortune of Westholt, or of any other, could but give him one man's fair chance.

But having that chance, he knew he should not relinquish it soon. There swept back into his mind the story of the marriage of his ancestor, Red Godwyn, and he laughed low in spite of himself.

Miss Vanderpoel looked up at him quickly.

"Please tell me about it, if it is very amusing," she said.

"I wonder if it will amuse you," was his answer. "Do you like savage romance?"

"Very much."

It might seem a propos de rien, but he did not care in the least. He wanted to hear what she would say.

"An ancestor of mine--a certain Red Godwyn--was a barbarian immensely to my taste. He became enamoured of rumours of the beauty of the daughter and heiress of his bitterest enemy. In his day, when one wanted a thing, one rode forth with axe and spear to fight for it."

"A simple and alluring method," commented Betty. "What was her name?"

She leaned in light ease against the stone back of her seat, the rose light cast by her parasol faintly flushed her. The silence of their retreat seemed accentuated by its background of music from the gardens. They smiled a second bravely into each other's eyes, then their glances became entangled, as they had done for a moment when they had stood together in Mount Dunstan park. For one moment each had been held prisoner then--now it was for longer.

"Alys of the Sea-Blue Eyes."

Betty tried to release herself, but could not.

"Sometimes the sea is grey," she said.

His own eyes were still in hers.

"Hers were the colour of the sea on a day when the sun shines on it, and there are large fleece-white clouds floating in the blue above. They sparkled and were often like bluebells under water."

"Bluebells under water sounds entrancing," said Betty.

He caught his breath slightly.

"They were--entrancing," he said. "That was evidently the devil of it--saving your presence."

"I have never objected to the devil," said Betty. "He is an energetic, hard-working creature and paints himself an honest black. Please tell me the rest."

"Red Godwyn went forth, and after a bloody fight took his enemy's castle. If we still lived in like simple, honest times, I should take Dunholm Castle in the same way. He also took Alys of the Eyes and bore her away captive."

"From such incidents developed the germs of the desire for female suffrage," Miss Vanderpoel observed gently.

"The interest of the story lies in the fact that apparently the savage was either epicure or sentimentalist, or both. He did not treat the lady ill. He shut her in a tower chamber overlooking his courtyard, and after allowing her three days to weep, he began his barbarian wooing. Arraying himself in splendour he ordered her to appear before him. He sat upon the dais in his banquet hall, his retainers gathered about him--a great feast spread. In archaic English we are told that the board groaned beneath the weight of golden trenchers and flagons. Minstrels played and sang, while he displayed all his splendour."

"They do it yet," said Miss Vanderpoel, "in London and New York and other places."

"The next day, attended by his followers, he took her with him to ride over his lands. When she returned to her tower chamber she had learned how powerful and great a chieftain he was. She 'laye softely' and was attended by many maidens, but she had no entertainment but to look out upon the great green court. There he arranged games and trials of strength and skill, and she saw him bigger, stronger, and more splendid than any other man. He did not even lift his eyes to her window. He also sent her daily a rich gift."

"How long did this go on?"

"Three months. At the end of that time he commanded her presence again in his banquet hall. He told her the gates were opened, the drawbridge

down and an escort waiting to take her back to her father's lands, if she would."

"What did she do?"

"She looked at him long--and long. She turned proudly away--in the sea-blue eyes were heavy and stormy tears, which seeing----"

"Ah, he saw them?" from Miss Vanderpoel.

"Yes. And seizing her in his arms caught her to his breast, calling for a priest to make them one within the hour. I am quoting the chronicle. I was fifteen when I read it first."

"It is spirited," said Betty, "and Red Godwyn was almost modern in his methods."

While professing composure and lightness of mood, the spell which works between two creatures of opposite sex when in such case wrought in them and made them feel awkward and stiff. When each is held apart from the other by fate, or will, or circumstance, the spell is a stupefying thing, deadening even the clearness of sight and wit.

"I must slink back now," Betty said, rising. "Will you slink back with me to give me countenance? I have greatly liked Red Godwyn."

So it occurred that when Nigel Anstruthers saw them again it was as they crossed the lawn together, and people looked up from ices and cups of tea to follow their slow progress with questioning or approving eyes.