

## CHAPTER L

### THE PRIMEVAL THING

When Mr. Vanderpoel landed in England his wife was with him. This quiet-faced woman, who was known to be on her way to join her daughter in England, was much discussed, envied, and glanced at, when she promenaded the deck with her husband, or sat in her chair softly wrapped in wonderful furs. Gradually, during the past months, she had been told certain modified truths connected with her elder daughter's marriage. They had been painful truths, but had been so softened and expurgated of their worst features that it had been possible to bear them, when one realised that they did not, at least, mean that Rosy had forgotten or ceased to love her mother and father, or wish to visit her home. The steady clearness of foresight and readiness of resource which were often spoken of as being specially characteristic of Reuben S. Vanderpoel, were all required, and employed with great tenderness, in the management of this situation. As little as it was possible that his wife should know, was the utmost she must hear and be hurt by. Unless ensuing events compelled further revelations, the rest of it should be kept from her. As further protection, her husband had frankly asked her to content herself with a degree of limited information.

"I have meant all our lives, Annie, to keep from you the unpleasant things a woman need not be troubled with," he had said. "I promised myself I would when you were a girl. I knew you would face things, if

I needed your help, but you were a gentle little soul, like Rosy, and I never intended that you should bear what was useless. Anstruthers was a blackguard, and girls of all nations have married blackguards before. When you have Rosy safe at home, and know nothing can hurt her again, you both may feel you would like to talk it over. Till then we won't go into detail. You trust me, I know, when I tell you that you shall hold Rosy in your arms very soon. We may have something of a fight, but there can only be one end to it in a country as decent as England. Anstruthers isn't exactly what I should call an Englishman. Men rather like him are to be found in two or three places." His good-looking, shrewd, elderly face lighted with a fine smile. "My handsome Betty has saved us a good deal by carrying out her fifteen-year-old plan of going to find her sister," he ended.

Before they landed they had decided that Mrs. Vanderpoel should be comfortably established in a hotel in London, and that after this was arranged, her husband should go to Stornham Court alone. If Sir Nigel could be induced to listen to logic, Rosalie, her child, and Betty should come at once to town.

"And, if he won't listen to logic," added Mr. Vanderpoel, with a dry composure, "they shall come just the same, my dear." And his wife put her arms round his neck and kissed him because she knew what he said was quite true, and she admired him--as she had always done--greatly.

But when the pilot came on board and there began to stir in the ship the agreeable and exciting bustle of the delivery of letters and welcoming telegrams, among Mr. Vanderpoel's many yellow envelopes he opened one the contents of which caused him to stand still for some moments--so still, indeed, that some of the bystanders began to touch each other's elbows and whisper. He certainly read the message two or three times before he folded it up, returned it to its receptacle, and walked gravely to his wife's sitting-room.

"Reuben!" she exclaimed, after her first look at him, "have you bad news? Oh, I hope not!"

He came and sat down quietly beside her, taking her hand.

"Don't be frightened, Annie, my dear," he said. "I have just been reminded of a verse in the Bible--about vengeance not belonging to mere human beings. Nigel Anstruthers has had a stroke of paralysis, and it is not his first. Apparently, even if he lies on his back for some months thinking of harm, he won't be able to do it. He is finished."

When he was carried by the express train through the country, he saw all that Betty had seen, though the summer had passed, and there were neither green trees nor hedges. He knew all that the long letters had meant of stirred emotion and affection, and he was strongly moved, though his mind was full of many things. There were the farmhouses, the square-towered churches, the red-pointed hop oasts, and the village

children. How distinctly she had made him see them! His Betty--his splendid Betty! His heart beat at the thought of seeing her high, young black head, and holding her safe in his arms again. Safe! He resented having used the word, because there was a shock in seeming to admit the possibility that anything in the universe could do wrong to her. Yet one man had been villain enough to mean her harm, and to threaten her with it. He slightly shuddered as he thought of how the man was finished--done for.

The train began to puff more loudly, as it slackened its pace. It was drawing near to a rustic little station, and, as it passed in, he saw a carriage standing outside, waiting on the road, and a footman in a long coat, glancing into each window as the train went by. Two or three country people were watching it intently. Miss Vanderpoel's father was coming up from London on it. The stationmaster rushed to open the carriage door, and the footman hastened forward, but a tall lovely thing in grey was opposite the step as Mr. Vanderpoel descended it to the platform. She did not recognise the presence of any other human being than himself. For the moment she seemed to forget even the broad-shouldered man who had plainly come with her. As Reuben S. Vanderpoel folded her in his arms, she folded him and kissed him as he was not sure she had ever kissed him before.

"My splendid Betty! My own fine girl!" he said.

And when she cried out "Father! Father!" she bent and kissed the breast

of his coat.

He knew who the big young man was before she turned to present him.

"This is Lord Mount Dunstan, father," she said. "Since Nigel was brought home, he has been very good to us."

Reuben S. Vanderpoel looked well into the man's eyes, as he shook hands with him warmly, and this was what he said to himself:

"Yes, she's safe. This is quite safe. It is to be trusted with the whole thing."

Not many days after her husband's arrival at Stornham Court, Mrs. Vanderpoel travelled down from London, and, during her journey, scarcely saw the wintry hedges and bare trees, because, as she sat in her cushioned corner of the railway carriage, she was inwardly offering up gentle, pathetically ardent prayers of gratitude. She was the woman who prays, and the many sad petitions of the past years were being answered at last. She was being allowed to go to Rosy--whatsoever happened, she could never be really parted from her girl again. She asked pardon many times because she had not been able to be really sorry when she had heard of her son-in-law's desperate condition. She could feel pity for him in his awful case, she told herself, but she could not wish for the thing which perhaps she ought to wish for. She had confided this to her husband with innocent, penitent tears, and he had stroked her cheek,

which had always been his comforting way since they had been young things together.

"My dear," he said, "if a tiger with hydrophobia were loose among a lot of decent people--or indecent ones, for the matter of that--you would not feel it your duty to be very sorry if, in springing on a group of them, he impaled himself on an iron fence. Don't reproach yourself too much." And, though the realism of the picture he presented was such as to make her exclaim, "No! No!" there were still occasional moments when she breathed a request for pardon if she was hard of heart--this softest of creatures human.

It was arranged by the two who best knew and loved her that her meeting with Rosalie should have no spectators, and that their first hour together should be wholly unbroken in upon.

"You have not seen each other for so long," Betty said, when, on her arrival, she led her at once to the morning-room where Rosy waited, pale with joy, but when the door was opened, though the two figures were swept into each other's arms by one wild, tremulous rush of movement, there were no sounds to be heard, only caught breaths, until the door had closed again.

The talks which took place between Mr. Vanderpoel and Lord Mount Dunstan were many and long, and were of absorbing interest to both. Each presented to the other a new world, and a type of which his previous

knowledge had been but incomplete.

"I wonder," Mr. Vanderpoel said, in the course of one of them, "if my world appeals to you as yours appeals to me. Naturally, from your standpoint, it scarcely seems probable. Perhaps the up-building of large financial schemes presupposes a certain degree of imagination. I am becoming a romantic New York man of business, and I revel in it. Kedgers, for instance," with the smile which, somehow, suggested Betty, "Kedgers and the *Lilium Giganteum*, Mrs. Welden and old Doby threaten to develop into quite necessary factors in the scheme of happiness. What Betty has felt is even more comprehensible than it seemed at first."

They walked and rode together about the countryside; when Mount Dunstan itself was swept clean of danger, and only a few convalescents lingered to be taken care of in the huge ballroom, they spent many days in going over the estate. The desolate beauty of it appealed to and touched Mr. Vanderpoel, as it had appealed to and touched his daughter, and, also, wakened in him much new and curious delight. But Mount Dunstan, with a touch of his old obstinacy, insisted that he should ignore the beauty, and look closely at less admirable things.

"You must see the worst of this," he said. "You must understand that I can put no good face upon things, that I offer nothing, because I have nothing to offer."

If he had not been swept through and through by a powerful and rapturous

passion, he would have detested and abhorred these days of deliberate proud laying bare of the nakedness of the land. But in the hours he spent with Betty Vanderpoel the passion gave him knowledge of the things which, being elemental, do not concern themselves with pride and obstinacy, and do not remember them. Too much had ended, and too much begun, to leave space or thought for poor things. In their eyes, when they were together, and even when they were apart, dwelt a glow which was deeply moving to those who, looking on, were sufficiently profound of thought to understand.

Watching the two walking slowly side by side down the leafless avenue on a crystal winter day, Mr. Vanderpoel conversed with the vicar, whom he greatly liked.

"A young man of the name of Selden," he remarked, "told me more of this than he knew."

"G. Selden," said the vicar, with affectionate smiling. "He is not aware that he was largely concerned in the matter. In fact, without G. Selden, I do not know how, exactly, we should have got on. How is he, nice fellow?"

"Extremely well, and in these days in my employ. He is of the honest, indefatigable stuff which makes its way."

His own smiles, as he watched the two tall figures in the distance,



settled into an expression of speculative absorption, because he was reflecting upon profoundly interesting matters.

"There is a great primeval thing which sometimes--not often, only sometimes--occurs to two people," he went on. "When it leaps into being, it is well if it is not thwarted, or done to death. It has happened to my girl and Mount Dunstan. If they had been two young tinkers by the roadside, they would have come together, and defied their beggary. As it is, I recognise, as I sit here, that the outcome of what is to be may reach far, and open up broad new ways."

"Yes," said the vicar. "She will live here and fill a strong man's life with wonderful human happiness--her splendid children will be born here, and among them will be those who lead the van and make history."

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For some time Nigel Anstruthers lay in his room at Stornham Court, surrounded by all of aid and luxury that wealth and exalted medical science could gather about him. Sometimes he lay a livid unconscious mask, sometimes his nurses and doctors knew that in his hollow eyes there was the light of a raging half reason, and they saw that he struggled to utter coherent sounds which they might comprehend. This he never accomplished, and one day, in the midst of such an effort, he was stricken dumb again, and soon afterwards sank into stillness and died.

And the Shuttle in the hand of Fate, through every hour of every day,  
and through the slow, deep breathing of all the silent nights, weaves  
to and fro--to and fro--drawing with it the threads of human life and  
thought which strengthen its web: and trace the figures of its yet vague  
and uncompleted design.