

THE PRINCIPAL GIRL

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THE PRINCIPAL GIRL

CHAPTER I

A GREAT PROCONSUL; AND OTHER PHENOMENA

THE great Proconsul stood on one of Messrs. Maple's best hearthrugs in Grosvenor Square. A typical payer of the super-tax, a pink and prosperous gentleman in a morning coat and striped trousers, his appearance had long commanded the admiration of his country.

He had not ruled the teeming millions of the Ganges, although the strength of his digestion and his absence of imagination would at any time have enabled him to do so. But for a period of nine weeks he had been the Resident of Baratavia North-West; and partly for that reason and partly for a reason even more cogent, he had the distinction of being the last peer created by Mr. Vandeleur's last government.

The world is familiar with Sir William Richmond's fine portrait of Walter Augustus, first Baron Shelmerdine of Potterhanworth now, on loan at the National Portrait Gallery. In this the national asset appears as he encountered his Sovereign in knee breeches, silk stockings, shoe buckles and other regalia.

Competent judges consider it an excellent likeness, and of course quite unexceptionable as a work of art. It is the portrait of a happily endowed Englishman in his manly prime, to which

the nation at large is able to refer between the hours of ten and four, Fridays excepted.

Eton, Balliol, diplomacy, private means, together with various places of emolument under the Crown, had each a share in raising Shelmerdine of Potterhanworth to his elevation. A first baron certainly, but not a mushroom growth. The honors of a grateful nation had come to him mainly because he had not been able to avoid them. From early youth he had been ranged with those who always do the right thing at the right time in the right way. He had always hit the bull's-eye so exactly in the centre that public regard had had to strive to keep pace with his progress.

Up till the age of one-and-thirty, Shelmerdine—not then of Potterhanworth—had like humbler mortals just a sporting chance of getting off the target. But at the age of thirty-one he married. By that judicious action he forfeited any little chance he may have had of dying an obscure, private individual.

Sociologists differ as to what is the most portentous phenomenon of the age in which we dwell, but there is a body of the well-informed which awards the palm unhesitatingly to that amiable institution, the Suffolk Colthurst.

The world is under great obligations to this interesting representative of the higher mammalia. The upper reaches of Theology are whitened with the bones of the Suffolk Colthurst. It makes an almost ideal Under-Secretary, it is always so smooth-spoken and well-brushed; it makes a most excellent Judge; there is no place of emolument it is not fitted to grace; and in the unlikely event of a doubt invading your mind as to

whether the particular schoolmaster will be inducted to the vacant see of Wincanton, you have only to look up which branch it was of the Suffolk Colthursts into which he married, and at what period of his life he married her.

What would be the Established Order without the Colthurst of Suffolk? What would be the Navy and Army, Law and Medicine, Parliament itself, Art—and yes, gentlemen!—Letters, without the Colthurst of Suffolk?

It is an error, however, to suppose that this pleasant phenomenon confines itself to one little corner of the globe. The Colthurst is indigenous to Suffolk, but for generations there has been quite a colony settled in Kent. There is also the world-famous Scotch variety, and of late traces of the Suffolk Colthurst have been found in America. The Transatlantic mind, never slow at diagnosis, and with its trick of masterful and telling speech, has already ventured to define its creed. In America the creed of the Suffolk Colthurst has been defined as the Art of Getting There with Both Feet.

Please do not assume that there is anything ignoble about the Colthurst of Suffolk. Quite the contrary. It has been laid down as a general principle that the Suffolk Colthurst never makes money but always marries it. That is not to say, of course, that a Suffolk Colthurst has never been known to make money, because such a statement, however pleasant, would be in excess of the truth. But the Suffolk Colthurst, *pur sang*, sets less store by the making of money than by the spending of money in the way that shows it has always had money to spend.

As a matter of fact it always has had money to spend. As soon as banking, brewing, land-jobbing, share-broking, and other polite arts began to flourish in Suffolk, the Colthurst began to marry and to give in marriage. And to this day if you enter a small private bank in a quiet cathedral city, and you take the trouble to make inquiries, you are quite likely to learn that the local Suffolk Colthurst has the chief proprietary interest in the concern. The family has always been partial to banking. It is such an eminently sensible practice to lend money at double the rate at which you borrow it; and it has the additional advantage that you can't call it Trade.

Our immediate business, however, is with the blameless gentleman who at the age of one-and-thirty was accepted in marriage by a charming representative of the genus, and at the age of nine-and-fifty was made a peer by Mr. Vandeleur's government, immediately antecedent to its total and permanent eclipse.

To return, then, to Shelmerdine of Potterhanworth. For nearly an hour had he occupied the tasteful hearthrug provided by Messrs. Maple. A frown chequered his serene front and several times he had recourse to the Leading Morning Journal which lay open on his writing-table at page four.

At the top of the third column was a communication dated from the Helicon Club, S. W. It was signed by himself and had been crowned with the glory of the largest type you could have without having to pay for it. Immediately below, in type equally glorious, were communications veiled in the discreet anonymity of "A Lover of Animals" and "Verax."

Discreet anonymity is disagreeable as a rule. The fact was the great Proconsul was in the act of rendering a signal service to the Public; and in consequence the Public did not thank him for his interference. To be sure, it was the first time in his life that he had been guilty of such an indiscretion. This was his first single-handed attempt to render a service to society at large; and, as was only to be expected, society at large was not making itself very pleasant about it.

There could be no doubt that at this moment the great Proconsul was the most unpopular man in London. Old ladies in ermine tippets scowled at him as he passed along Park Lane; and a hostess of mark, famous for her wealth and her humanity, had already crossed him out of her dinner list.

CHAPTER II

TOUCHES UPON A MATTER OF GRAVE PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

OF what crime, do you suppose, has S. of P. been guilty? It was merely that in a public print he had ventured to ask why the payment of the nominal sum of seven and sixpence per annum conferred upon the dogs of London certain privileges in respect of its pavements which society at large, for some little time past, has ceased to claim.

The resources of civilization were ranged already against Shelmerdine of Potterhanworth. Nice-minded women in point lace refused to meet the self-constituted champion of public amenity; the black-velveted mistresses of the Flossies and the Fidos thought the state of his mind must be unpleasant; he was an object of contumely where all that was fair and of good report held sway in the life of the metropolis.

It was a pretty quarrel, and both sides were sustaining it with spirit. The Pro-Darlings, with Verax and a Lover of Animals at their head, had rejoined with mannerly vituperation to the polished sarcasm of the Anti-Darlings. What is your remedy? had inquired the Friends of Fido with a rather obvious sneer. Banish the dumb creation from the pavements of great cities, had replied Inspired Commonsense.

And for our own poor part, Commissioners of the Office of Works, we think that reply is worth a statue.

Verax was making merry though at the expense of a public ornament, and the occupant of Messrs. Maple's best hearthrug, who remembered Verax perfectly well as a grubby infant at his private school, had already formed the pious resolve of putting the fear of God into Verax.

S. of P., having pondered long, sat down at his writing-table; dipped his quill with a certain inherent natural grandeur, and started out on his crushing reply:—"Sir, I have read with amazement the diatribe against my humble and unworthy self which appears under the signature of Verax, to which you have extended the generous hospitality of your columns."

At this point S. of P. bit his quill with such violence that a large blot was shaken from the end of it upon the monogram which decorated the communication.

"The problem as I envisage it"—S. of P. took a small gold pencil out of his waistcoat pocket and made a note on his blotting pad. "The problem as I envisage it"—but the problem that he did envisage was the Suffolk Colthurst, who at that moment entered the room.

The Suffolk Colthurst was large and blonde—so large and so blonde that to a profane mind she rather conveyed the suggestion of a particularly well-grown cauliflower.

"Wally, *please*, don't let me spoil your morning. Don't let me interrupt you, *please*."

The voice of the Suffolk Colthurst was really quite agreeable, although a little light in the upper register. You might even call it flutelike if you cared to indulge in metaphor.

“Not at all, Agatha,” said S. of P. with excellent chest resonance. “I am merely envisaging the problem of the—ah—”

“*Don’t, Wally.*” The voice of the Suffolk Colthurst was perhaps a shade less flutelike if history really calls for these *nuances*. “You are making yourself ridiculous. Please drop the subject.”

“No, Agatha.” The sun setting over Africa might be compared to the brow of the great Proconsul. “Man in *The Thunderer* most impertinent. Signs himself Verax. Suspect it’s that fellow—”

“Wally.” The Suffolk Colthurst roared here a little less gently than usual. “I will not uphold you! Everybody thinks it is most injudicious.”

“Everybody, Agatha?”

“Paul and Millicent consider—”

“Public health, Agatha, public dec—”

“Wally, once for all, I absolutely refuse to discuss the subject. I will not have you make yourself ridiculous.”

The Suffolk Colthurst, with an approximation to natural majesty, put on a pair of gold-rimmed eyeglasses which were suspended round her neck by a cord, and took the *Leading Morning Journal* off the First Baron’s table.

“Impertinent, certainly. Sarcasm, I suppose.”

“Suspect it’s that fellow Huffham, because I declined to propose him under Rule Two.”

“Certainly you do appear to have laid yourself open, but the letter is most ill-natured.”

“As though I should be likely to propose him. Known the man all my life.”

The Suffolk Colthurst gathered her majestic inches for the ultimatum.

“Wally, you must listen to me. This matter has already gone too far. Let it drop. It is the first time I have known you go out of your way to make yourself ridiculous.”

“Public health, Agatha, public decency.”

“Leave it to the County Council.”

“They are not competent to envisage such a problem as this. And I am determined, in the face of that letter—”

“Paul says that no man can afford to make himself a public laughing-stock.”

“Paul’s a coward.”

“Paul says they are certain to make you an Apostle.”

“Eh?”

“If you don’t make a fool of yourself.”

“Paul said that! Why, pray, should they make me an Apostle?”

“Because there’s nobody else; and people will say the race has already passed its zenith if the vacancy is not filled up at once.”

“I will say this for Paul—he is well-informed as a rule.”

“Wait, Wally, until you are an Apostle.”

“Very well then, with the greatest possible reluctance I yield the point for the present. Verax shall wait until—Tell me, Agatha, what have you to say to me?”

The good, the noble—forgive our fervor, O ye Liberal organs of opinion, even if *your* bosoms be not thrilled by this whole-souled devotion to the public weal—the good and noble Shelmerdine of Potterhanworth flung the offending print upon Messrs. Maple’s expensive carpet in a sudden uncontrollable access of private pique.

“Agatha.” The accents of the great Proconsul were choked with emotion. “Tell me, Agatha, what you have to say to me?”

“Wally,” said the Suffolk Colthurst, “what I have to say to you is this.”

CHAPTER III

IS DOMESTIC IN THE MAIN, BUT WE HOPE NOT UNWORTHY OF A GREAT CONSTITUTIONAL STATESMAN

WHEN you are up against a serious anticlimax it is a golden rule to begin a fresh chapter.

The Suffolk Colthurst paused, and sat with a further access of natural majesty upon a chair Louis Quinze, supplied, like the hearthrug, by Tottenham Court Road.

“Wally, Philip has declined to come to the Queen’s Hall this afternoon to hear Busoni.”

Doing his best even in this dangerous anticlimax, S. of P. retrieved the Leading Morning Journal from the carpet, straightened out its crumpled folds with patient humility, laid it on the table, sat down in his own chair—Tottenham Court Road of the best period—put up his eyeglass—by Cary of Pall Mall, maker to the Admiralty—and, in the voice of one pronouncing a benediction, said, “Well, Agatha?”

“Actually declined. Tells me he’s engaged to a pantomime at Drury Lane.”

“Matter of taste, I suppose.”

“Taste, Wally! Dear Adela is coming, and I have taken such trouble to arrange this.”

The Proconsul showed a little perturbation.

“No accounting for taste, I presume. Why a man of his age, rising twenty-eight, should prefer—”

“Wally, it is very wrong, and you must speak to him. It is not kind to dear Adela. Please ring the bell.”

The Proconsul rang the bell, and a young and very good-looking footman attended the summons.

“Joseph,” said his mistress, “if Mr. Philip has not gone yet, tell him, please, that his father would like to see him.”

After a lapse of about five minutes, a young man sauntered into the library. He was a somewhat somber-looking young man in a chocolate-colored suiting.

“Good morning, Philip,” said the First Baron.

“Mornin’, father,” said the heir to the barony.

“Philip,” said the First Baron, “your mother tells me that you have declined to accompany her and Adela Rocklaw to the Albert Hall this afternoon to hear Paderewski.”

The heir to the barony knitted the intellectual forehead that was his by inheritance.

“Not declined, you know, exactly. It’s a bit of a mix. I thought the concert was next Saturday.” Mr. Philip was a slow and rather heavy young man, but his air was quite sweet and

humble, and not without a sort of tacit deference for both parents. "Fact is, I was keepin' next Saturday."

"Why not go this afternoon as you have got wrong in the date? Your mother has been at so much trouble, and I am sure Adela Rocklaw will be disappointed."

"Unfortunately I've fixed up this other thing."

"Engaged to a music hall, I understand."

"Pantomime at Drury Lane," said Philip the sombre.

"Quite so." The Proconsul, like other great men, was slightly impatient of meticulous detail in affairs outside his orbit. "Hardly right, is it, to disappoint Adela Rocklaw, especially after your mother"—Mother, still mounted on the Louis Quinze, sat with eyelids lowered but very level—"has taken so much trouble? At least I, at your age, should not have thought so."

Mr. Philip pondered a little.

"A bit awkward perhaps. I say, Mater, don't you think you could fix up another day?"

The gaze of Mother grew a little less abstract at this invocation.

"Impossible, Phil-ipp"—the Rubens-Minerva countenance, whose ample chin was folded trebly in rolls of adipose tissue was a credit to the Governing Classes—"Dear Adela goes to High Cliff on Wednesday for the shooting."

"Well, I'm sorry," said Mr. Philip quite nicely and politely, "that I shall have to go to Drury Lane this afternoon."

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