CHAPTER X

"IS LADY ANSTRUTHERS AT HOME?"

All that she had brought with her to England, combined with what she had called "sophistication," but which was rather her exquisite appreciation of values and effects, she took with her when she went the next day to Charing Cross Station and arranged herself at her ease in the railway carriage, while her maid bought their tickets for Stornham.

What the people in the station saw, the guards and porters, the men in the book stalls, the travellers hurrying past, was a striking-looking girl, whose colouring and carriage made one turn to glance after her, and who, having bought some periodicals and papers, took her place in a first-class compartment and watched the passersby interestedly through the open window. Having been looked at and remarked on during her whole life, Bettina did not find it disturbing that more than one corduroy-clothed porter and fresh-coloured, elderly gentleman, or freshly attired young one, having caught a glimpse of her through her window, made it convenient to saunter past or hover round. She looked at them much more frankly than they looked at her. To her they were all specimens of the types she was at present interested in. For practical reasons she was summing up English character with more deliberate intention than she had felt in the years when she had gradually learned to know Continental types and differentiate such peculiarities as were significant of their ranks and nations. As the first Reuben Vanderpoel

had studied the countenances and indicative methods of the inhabitants of the new parts of the country in which it was his intention to do business, so the modernity of his descendant applied itself to observation for reasons parallel in nature though not in actual kind. As he had brought beads and firewater to bear as agents upon savages who would barter for them skins and products which might be turned into money, so she brought her nineteenth-century beauty, steadfastness of purpose and alertness of brain to bear upon the matter the practical dealing with which was the end she held in view. To bear herself in this matter with as practical a control of situations as that with which her great-grandfather would have borne himself in making a trade with a previously unknown tribe of Indians was quite her intention, though it had not occurred to her to put it to herself in any such form. Still, whether she was aware of the fact or not, her point of view was exactly what the first Reuben Vanderpoel's had been on many very different occasions. She had before her the task of dealing with facts and factors of which at present she knew but little. Astuteness of perception, self-command, and adaptability were her chief resources. She was ready, either for calm, bold approach, or equally calm and wholly non-committal retreat.

The perceptions she had brought with her filled her journey into Kent with delicious things, delicious recognition of beauties she had before known the existence of only through the reading of books, and the dwelling upon their charms as reproduced, more or less perfectly, on canvas. She saw roll by her, with the passing of the train, the

loveliness of land and picturesqueness of living which she had saved for herself with epicurean intention for years. Her fancy, when detached from her thoughts of her sister, had been epicurean, and she had been quite aware that it was so. When she had left the suburbs and those villages already touched with suburbanity behind, she felt herself settle into a glow of luxurious enjoyment in the freshness of her pleasure in the familiar, and yet unfamiliar, objects in the thick-hedged fields, whose broad-branched, thick-foliaged oaks and beeches were more embowering in their shade, and sweeter in their green than anything she remembered that other countries had offered her, even at their best. Within the fields the hawthorn hedges beautifully enclosed were groups of resigned mother sheep with their young lambs about them. The curious pointed tops of the red hopkilns, piercing the trees near the farmhouses, wore an almost intentional air of adding picturesque detail. There were clusters of old buildings and dots of cottages and cottage gardens which made her now and then utter exclamations of delight. Little inarticulate Rosy had seen and felt it all twelve years before on her hopeless bridal home-coming when Nigel had sat huddled unbecomingly in the corner of the railway carriage. Her power of expression had been limited to little joyful gasps and obvious laudatory adjectives, smothered in their birth by her first glance at her bridegroom. Betty, in seeing it, knew all the exquisiteness of her own pleasure, and all the meanings of it.

Yes, it was England--England. It was the England of Constable and Morland, of Miss Mitford and Miss Austen, the Brontes and George Eliot.

The land which softly rolled and clothed itself in the rich verdure of many trees, sometimes in lovely clusters, sometimes in covering copse, was Constable's; the ripe young woman with the fat-legged children and the farmyard beasts about her, as she fed the hens from the wooden piggin under her arm, was Morland's own. The village street might be Miss Mitford's, the well-to-do house Jane Austen's own fancy, in its warm brick and comfortable decorum. She laughed a little as she thought it.

"That is American," she said, "the habit of comparing every stick and stone and breathing thing to some literary parallel. We almost invariably say that things remind us of pictures or books--most usually books. It seems a little crude, but perhaps it means that we are an intensely literary and artistic people."

She continued to find comparisons revealing to her their appositeness, until her journey had ended by the train's slackening speed and coming to a standstill before the rural-looking little station which had presented its quaint aspect to Lady Anstruthers on her home-coming of years before.

It had not, during the years which certainly had given time for change, altered in the least. The station master had grown stouter and more rosy, and came forward with his respectful, hospitable air, to attend to the unusual-looking young lady, who was the only first-class passenger. He thought she must be a visitor expected at some country house, but

none of the carriages, whose coachmen were his familiar acquaintances, were in waiting. That such a fine young lady should be paying a visit at any house whose owners did not send an equipage to attend her coming, struck him as unusual. The brougham from the "Crown," though a decent country town vehicle, seemed inadequate. Yet, there it stood drawn up outside the station, and she went to it with the manner of a young lady who had ordered its attendance and knew it would be there.

Wells felt a good deal of interest. Among the many young ladies who descended from the first-class compartments and passed through the little waiting-room on their way to the carriages of the gentry they were going to visit, he did not know when a young lady had "caught his eye," so to speak, as this one did. She was not exactly the kind of young lady one would immediately class mentally as "a foreigner," but the blue of her eyes was so deep, and her hair and eyelashes so dark, that these things, combining themselves with a certain "way" she had, made him feel her to be of a type unfamiliar to the region, at least.

He was struck, also, by the fact that the young lady had no maid with her. The truth was that Bettina had purposely left her maid in town. If awkward things occurred, the presence of an attendant would be a sort of complication. It was better, on the first approach, to be wholly unencumbered.

"How far are we from Stornham Court?" she inquired.

"Five miles, my lady," he answered, touching his cap. She expressed something which to the rural and ingenuous, whose standards were defined, demanded a recognition of probable rank.

"I'd like to know," was his comment to his wife when he went home to dinner, "who has gone to Stornham Court to-day. There's few enough visitors go there, and none such as her, for certain. She don't live anywhere on the line above here, either, for I've never seen her face before. She was a tall, handsome one--she was, but it isn't just that made you look after her. She was a clever one with a spirit, I'll be bound. I was wondering what her ladyship would have to say to her."

"Perhaps she was one of HIS fine ladies?" suggestively.

"That she wasn't, either. And, as for that, I wonder what he'd have to say to such as she is."

There was complexity of element enough in the thing she was on her way to do, Bettina was thinking, as she was driven over the white ribbon of country road that unrolled over rise and hollow, between the sheep-dotted greenness of fields and the scented hedges. The soft beauty enclosing her was a little shut out from her by her mental attitude. She brought forward for her own decisions upon suitable action a number of possible situations she might find herself called upon to confront. The one thing necessary was that she should be prepared for anything whatever, even for Rosy's not being pleased to see her, or for finding

Sir Nigel a thoroughly reformed and amiable character.

"It is the thing which seemingly CANNOT happen which one is most likely to find one's self face to face with. It will be a little awkward to arrange, if he has developed every domestic virtue, and is delighted to see me."

Under such rather confusing conditions her plan would be to present to them, as an affectionate surprise, the unheralded visit, which might appear a trifle uncalled for. She felt happily sure of herself under any circumstances not partaking of the nature of collisions at sea. Yet she had not behaved absolutely ill at the time of the threatened catastrophe in the Meridiana. Her remembrance, an oddly sudden one, of the definite manner of the red-haired second-class passenger, assured her of that. He had certainly had all his senses about him, and he had spoken to her as a person to be counted on.

Her pulse beat a little more hurriedly as the brougham entered Stornham village. It was picturesque, but struck her as looking neglected. Many of the cottages had an air of dilapidation. There were many broken windows and unmended garden palings. A suggested lack of whitewash in several cases was not cheerful.

"I know nothing of the duties of English landlords," she said, looking through her carriage window, "but I should do it myself, if I were Rosy."

She saw, as she was taken through the park gateway, that that structure was out of order, and that damaged diamond panes peered out from under the thickness of the ivy massing itself over the lodge.

"Ah!" was her thought, "it does not promise as it should. Happy people do not let things fall to pieces."

Even winding avenue, and spreading sward, and gorse, and broom, and bracken, enfolding all the earth beneath huge trees, were not fair enough to remove a sudden remote fear which arose in her rapidly reasoning mind. It suggested to her a point of view so new that, while she was amazed at herself for not having contemplated it before, she found herself wishing that the coachman would drive rather more slowly, actually that she might have more time to reflect.

They were nearing a dip in the park, where there was a lonely looking pool. The bracken was thick and high there, and the sun, which had just broken through a cloud, had pierced the trees with a golden gleam.

A little withdrawn from this shaft of brightness stood two figures, a dowdy little woman and a hunchbacked boy. The woman held some ferns in her hand, and the boy was sitting down and resting his chin on his hands, which were folded on the top of a stick.

"Stop here for a moment," Bettina said to the coachman. "I want to ask

that woman a question."

She had thought that she might discover if her sister was at the Court. She realised that to know would be a point of advantage. She leaned forward and spoke.

"I beg your pardon," she said, "I wonder if you can tell me----"

The woman came forward a little. She had a listless step and a faded, listless face.

"What did you ask?" she said.

Betty leaned still further forward.

"Can you tell me----" she began and stopped. A sense of stricture in the throat stopped her, as her eyes took in the washed-out colour of the thin face, the washed-out colour of the thin hair--thin drab hair, dragged in straight, hard unbecomingness from the forehead and cheeks.

Was it true that her heart was thumping, as she had heard it said that agitation made hearts thump?

She began again.

"Can you--tell me if--Lady Anstruthers is at home?" she inquired. As she

said it she felt the blood surge up from the furious heart, and the hand she had laid on the handle of the door of the brougham clutched it involuntarily.

The dowdy little woman answered her indifferently, staring at her a little.

"I am Lady Anstruthers," she said.

Bettina opened the carriage door and stood upon the ground.

"Go on to the house," she gave order to the coachman, and, with a somewhat startled look, he drove away.

"Rosy!" Bettina's voice was a hushed, almost awed, thing. "YOU are Rosy?"

The faded little wreck of a creature began to look frightened.

"Rosy!" she repeated, with a small, wry, painful smile.

She was the next moment held in the folding of strong, young arms, against a quickly beating heart. She was being wildly kissed, and the very air seemed rich with warmth and life.

"I am Betty," she heard. "Look at me, Rosy! I am Betty. Look at me and

remember!"

Lady Anstruthers gasped, and broke into a faint, hysteric laugh. She suddenly clutched at Bettina's arm. For a minute her gaze was wild as she looked up.

"Betty," she cried out. "No! No! No! I can't believe it! I can't! I can't!"

That just this thing could have taken place in her, Bettina had never thought. As she had reflected on her way from the station, the impossible is what one finds one's self face to face with. Twelve years should not have changed a pretty blonde thing of nineteen to a worn, unintelligent-looking dowdy of the order of dowdiness which seems to have lived beyond age and sex. She looked even stupid, or at least stupefied. At this moment she was a silly, middle-aged woman, who did not know what to do. For a few seconds Bettina wondered if she was glad to see her, or only felt awkward and unequal to the situation.

"I can't believe you," she cried out again, and began to shiver. "Betty! Little Betty? No! No! it isn't!"

She turned to the boy, who had lifted his chin from his stick, and was staring.

"Ughtred! Ughtred!" she called to him. "Come! She says--she says----"

She sat down upon a clump of heather and began to cry. She hid her face in her spare hands and broke into sobbing.

"Oh, Betty! No!" she gasped. "It's so long ago--it's so far away. You never came--no one--no one--came!"

The hunchbacked boy drew near. He had limped up on his stick. He spoke like an elderly, affectionate gnome, not like a child.

"Don't do that, mother," he said. "Don't let it upset you so, whatever it is."

"It's so long ago; it's so far away!" she wept, with catches in her breath and voice. "You never came!"

Betty knelt down and enfolded her again. Her bell-like voice was firm and clear.

"I have come now," she said. "And it is not far away. A cable will reach father in two hours."

Pursuing a certain vivid thought in her mind, she looked at her watch.

"If you spoke to mother by cable this moment," she added, with accustomed coolness, and she felt her sister actually start as she

spoke, "she could answer you by five o'clock."

Lady Anstruther's start ended in a laugh and gasp more hysteric than her first. There was even a kind of wan awakening in her face, as she lifted it to look at the wonderful newcomer. She caught her hand and held it, trembling, as she weakly laughed.

"It must be Betty," she cried. "That little stern way! It is so like her. Betty--Betty--dear!" She fell into a sobbing, shaken heap upon the heather. The harrowing thought passed through Betty's mind that she looked almost like a limp bundle of shabby clothes. She was so helpless in her pathetic, apologetic hysteria.

"I shall--be better," she gasped. "It's nothing. Ughtred, tell her."

"She's very weak, really," said the boy Ughtred, in his mature way. "She can't help it sometimes. I'll get some water from the pool."

"Let me go," said Betty, and she darted down to the water. She was back in a moment. The boy was rubbing and patting his mother's hands tenderly.

"At any rate," he remarked, as one consoled by a reflection, "father is not at home."