

## CHAPTER XI

"I THOUGHT YOU HAD ALL FORGOTTEN."

As, after a singular half hour spent among the bracken under the trees, they began their return to the house, Bettina felt that her sense of adventure had altered its character. She was still in the midst of a remarkable sort of exploit, which might end anywhere or in anything, but it had become at once more prosaic in detail and more intense in its significance. What its significance might prove likely to be when she faced it, she had not known, it is true. But this was different from--from anything. As they walked up the sun-dappled avenue she kept glancing aside at Rosy, and endeavouring to draw useful conclusions. The poor girl's air of being a plain, insignificant frump, long past youth, struck an extraordinary and, for the time, unexplainable note. Her ill-cut, out-of-date dress, the cheap suit of the hunchbacked boy, who limped patiently along, helped by his crutch, suggested possible explanations which were without doubt connected with the thought which had risen in Bettina's mind, as she had been driven through the broken-hinged entrance gate. What extraordinary disposal was being made of Rosy's money? But her each glance at her sister also suggested complication upon complication.

The singular half hour under the trees by the pool, spent, after the first hysteric moments were over, in vague exclaimings and questions,

which seemed half frightened and all at sea, had gradually shown her that she was talking to a creature wholly other than the Rosalie who had so well known and loved them all, and whom they had so well loved and known. They did not know this one, and she did not know them, she was even a little afraid of the stir and movement of their life and being.

The Rosy they had known seemed to be imprisoned within the wall the years of her separated life had built about her. At each breath she drew Bettina saw how long the years had been to her, and how far her home had seemed to lie away, so far that it could not touch her, and was only a sort of dream, the recalling of which made her suddenly begin to cry again every few minutes. To Bettina's sensitively alert mind it was plain that it would not do in the least to drag her suddenly out of her prison, or cloister, whichever it might be. To do so would be like forcing a creature accustomed only to darkness, to stare at the blazing sun. To have burst upon her with the old impetuous, candid fondness would have been to frighten and shock her as if with something bordering on indecency. She could not have stood it; perhaps such fondness was so remote from her in these days that she had even ceased to be able to understand it.

"Where are your little girls?" Bettina asked, remembering that there had been notice given of the advent of two girl babies.

"They died," Lady Anstruthers answered unemotionally. "They both died before they were a year old. There is only Ughtred."

Betty glanced at the boy and saw a small flame of red creep up on his cheek. Instinctively she knew what it meant, and she put out her hand and lightly touched his shoulder.

"I hope you'll like me, Ughtred," she said.

He almost started at the sound of her voice, but when he turned his face towards her he only grew redder, and looked awkward without answering. His manner was that of a boy who was unused to the amenities of polite society, and who was only made shy by them.

Without warning, a moment or so later, Bettina stopped in the middle of the avenue, and looked up at the arching giant branches of the trees which had reached out from one side to the other, as if to clasp hands or encompass an interlacing embrace. As far as the eye reached, they did this, and the beholder stood as in a high stately pergola, with breaks of deep azure sky between. Several mellow, cawing rooks were floating solemnly beneath or above the branches, now wand then settling in some highest one or disappearing in the thick greenness.

Lady Anstruthers stopped when her sister did so, and glanced at her in vague inquiry. It was plain that she had outlived even her sense of the beauty surrounding her.

"What are you looking at, Betty?" she asked.

"At all of it," Betty answered. "It is so wonderful."

"She likes it," said Ughtred, and then rather slunk a step behind his mother, as if he were ashamed of himself.

"The house is just beyond those trees," said Lady Anstruthers.

They came in full view of it three minutes later. When she saw it, Betty uttered an exclamation and stopped again to enjoy effects.

"She likes that, too," said Ughtred, and, although he said it sheepishly, there was imperfectly concealed beneath the awkwardness a pleasure in the fact.

"Do you?" asked Rosalie, with her small, painful smile.

Betty laughed.

"It is too picturesque, in its special way, to be quite credible," she said.

"I thought that when I first saw it," said Rosy.

"Don't you think so, now?"

"Well," was the rather uncertain reply, "as Nigel says, there's not much

good in a place that is falling to pieces."

"Why let it fall to pieces?" Betty put it to her with impartial promptness.

"We haven't money enough to hold it together," resignedly.

As they climbed the low, broad, lichen-blotched steps, whose broken stone balustrades were almost hidden in clutching, untrimmed ivy, Betty felt them to be almost incredible, too. The uneven stones of the terrace the steps mounted to were lichen-blotched and broken also. Tufts of green growths had forced themselves between the flags, and added an untidy beauty. The ivy tossed in branches over the red roof and walls of the house. It had been left unclipped, until it was rather an endlessly clambering tree than a creeper. The hall they entered had the beauty of spacious form and good, old oaken panelling. There were deep window seats and an ancient high-backed settle or so, and a massive table by the fireless hearth. But there were no pictures in places where pictures had evidently once hung, and the only coverings on the stone floor were the faded remnants of a central rug and a worn tiger skin, the head almost bald and a glass eye knocked out.

Bettina took in the unpromising details without a quiver of the extravagant lashes. These, indeed, and the eyes pertaining to them, seemed rather to sweep the fine roof, and a certain minstrel's gallery and staircase, than which nothing could have been much finer, with the

look of an appreciative admirer of architectural features and old oak. She had not journeyed to Stornham Court with the intention of disturbing Rosy, or of being herself obviously disturbed. She had come to observe situations and rearrange them with that intelligence of which unconsidered emotion or exclamation form no part.

"It is the first old English house I have seen," she said, with a sigh of pleasure. "I am so glad, Rosy--I am so glad that it is yours."

She put a hand on each of Rosy's thin shoulders--she felt sharply defined bones as she did so--and bent to kiss her. It was the natural affectionate expression of her feeling, but tears started to Rosy's eyes, and the boy Ughtred, who had sat down in a window seat, turned red again, and shifted in his place.

"Oh, Betty!" was Rosy's faint nervous exclamation, "you seem so beautiful and--so--so strange--that you frighten me."

Betty laughed with the softest possible cheerfulness, shaking her a little.

"I shall not seem strange long," she said, "after I have stayed with you a few weeks, if you will let me stay with you."

"Let you! Let you!" in a sort of gasp.

Poor little Lady Anstruthers sank on to a settle and began to cry again. It was plain that she always cried when things occurred. Ughtred's speech from his window seat testified at once to that.

"Don't cry, mother," he said. "You know how we've talked that over together. It's her nerves," he explained to Bettina. "We know it only makes things worse, but she can't stop it."

Bettina sat on the settle, too. She herself was not then aware of the wonderful feeling the poor little spare figure experienced, as her softly strong young arms curved about it. She was only aware that she herself felt that this was a heart-breaking thing, and that she must not--MUST not let it be seen how much she recognised its woefulness. This was pretty, fair Rosy, who had never done a harm in her happy life--this forlorn thing was her Rosy.

"Never mind," she said, half laughing again. "I rather want to cry myself, and I am stronger than she is. I am immensely strong."

"Yes! Yes!" said Lady Anstruthers, wiping her eyes, and making a tremendous effort at self-respecting composure. "You are strong. I have grown so weak in--well, in every way. Betty, I'm afraid this is a poor welcome. You see--I'm afraid you'll find it all so different from--from New York."

"I wanted to find it different," said Betty.

"But--but--I mean--you know----" Lady Anstruthers turned helplessly to the boy. Bettina was struck with the painful truth that she looked even silly as she turned to him. "Ughtred--tell her," she ended, and hung her head.

Ughtred had got down at once from his seat and limped forward. His unprepossessing face looked as if he pulled his childishness together with an unchildish effort.

"She means," he said, in his awkward way, "that she doesn't know how to make you comfortable. The rooms are all so shabby--everything is so shabby. Perhaps you won't stay when you see."

Bettina perceptibly increased the firmness of her hold on her sister's body. It was as if she drew it nearer to her side in a kind of taking possession. She knew that the moment had come when she might go this far, at least, without expressing alarming things.

"You cannot show me anything that will frighten me," was the answer she made. "I have come to stay, Rosy. We can make things right if they require it. Why not?"

Lady Anstruthers started a little, and stared at her. She knew ten thousand reasons why things had not been made right, and the casual inference that such reasons could be lightly swept away as if by the



mere wave of a hand, implied a power appertaining to a time seeming so lost forever that it was too much for her.

"Oh, Betty, Betty!" she cried, "you talk as if--you are so----!"

The fact, so simple to the members of the abnormal class to which she of a truth belonged, the class which heaped up its millions, the absolute knowledge that there was a great deal of money in the world and that she was of those who were among its chief owners, had ceased to seem a fact, and had vanished into the region of fairy stories.

That she could not believe it a reality revealed itself to Bettina, as by a flash, which was also a revelation of many things. There would be unpleasing truths to be learned, and she had not made her pilgrimage for nothing. But--in any event--there were advantages without doubt in the circumstance which subjected one to being perpetually pointed out as a daughter of a multi-millionaire. As this argued itself out for her with rapid lucidity, she bent and kissed Rosy once more. She even tried to do it lightly, and not to allow the rush of love and pity in her soul to betray her.

"I talk as if--as if I were Betty," she said. "You have forgotten. I have not. I have been looking forward to this for years. I have been planning to come to you since I was eleven years old. And here we sit."

"You didn't forget? You didn't?" faltered the poor wreck of Rosy. "Oh!

Oh! I thought you had all forgotten me--quite--quite!"

And her face went down in her spare, small hands, and she began to cry again.