## CHAPTER XII

## UGHTRED

Bettina stood alone in her bedroom a couple of hours later. Lady Anstruthers had taken her to it, preparing her for its limitations by explaining that she would find it quite different from her room in New York. She had been pathetically nervous and flushed about it, and Bettina had also been aware that the apartment itself had been hastily, and with much moving of objects from one chamber to another, made ready for her.

The room was large and square and low. It was panelled in small squares of white wood. The panels were old enough to be cracked here and there, and the paint was stained and yellow with time, where it was not knocked or worn off. There was a small paned, leaded window which filled a large part of one side of the room, and its deep seat was an agreeable feature. Sitting in it, one looked out over several red-walled gardens, and through breaks in the trees of the park to a fair beyond. Bettina stood before this window for a few moments, and then took a seat in the embrasure, that she might gaze out and reflect at leisure.

Her genius, as has before been mentioned, was the genius for living, for being vital. Many people merely exist, are kept alive by others, or continue to vegetate because the persistent action of normal functions will allow of their doing no less. Bettina Vanderpoel had lived vividly,

and in the midst of a self-created atmosphere of action from her first hour. It was not possible for her to be one of the horde of mere spectators. Wheresoever she moved there was some occult stirring of the mental, and even physical, air. Her pulses beat too strongly, her blood ran too fast to allow of inaction of mind or body. When, in passing through the village, she had seen the broken windows and the hanging palings of the cottages, it had been inevitable that, at once, she should, in thought, repair them, set them straight. Disorder filled her with a sort of impatience which was akin to physical distress. If she had been born a poor woman she would have worked hard for her living, and found an interest, almost an exhilaration, in her labour. Such gifts as she had would have been applied to the tasks she undertook. It had frequently given her pleasure to imagine herself earning her livelihood as a seamstress, a housemaid, a nurse. She knew what she could have put into her service, and how she could have found it absorbing. Imagination and initiative could make any service absorbing. The actual truth was that if she had been a housemaid, the room she set in order would have taken a character under her touch; if she had been a seamstress, her work would have been swiftly done, her imagination would have invented for her combinations of form and colour; if she had been a nursemaid, the children under her care would never have been sufficiently bored to become tiresome or intractable, and they also would have gained character to which would have been added an undeniable vividness of outlook. She could not have left them alone, so to speak. In obeying the mere laws of her being, she would have stimulated them. Unconsciously she had stimulated her fellow pupils at school; when she was his

companion, her father had always felt himself stirred to interest and enterprise.

"You ought to have been a man, Betty," he used to say to her sometimes.

But Betty had not agreed with him.

"You say that," she once replied to him, "because you see I am inclined to do things, to change them, if they need changing. Well, one is either born like that, or one is not. Sometimes I think that perhaps the people who must ACT are of a distinct race. A kind of vigorous restlessness drives them. I remember that when I was a child I could not see a pin lying upon the ground without picking it up, or pass a drawer which needed closing, without giving it a push. But there has always been as much for women to do as for men."

There was much to be done here of one sort of thing and another. That was certain. As she gazed through the small panes of her large windows, she found herself overlooking part of a wilderness of garden, which revealed itself through an arch in an overgrown laurel hedge. She had glimpses of unkempt grass paths and unclipped topiary work which had lost its original form. Among a tangle of weeds rose the heads of clumps of daffodils, stirred by a passing wind of spring. In the park beyond a cuckoo was calling.

She was conscious both of the forlorn beauty and significance of the

neglected garden, and of the clear quaintness of the cuckoo call, as she thought of other things.

"Her spirit and her health are broken," was her summing up. "Her prettiness has faded to a rag. She is as nervous as an ill-treated child. She has lost her wits. I do not know where to begin with her. I must let her tell me things as gradually as she chooses. Until I see Nigel I shall not know what his method with her has been. She looks as if she had ceased to care for things, even for herself. What shall I write to mother?"

She knew what she should write to her father. With him she could be explicit. She could record what she had found and what it suggested to her. She could also make clear her reason for hesitance and deliberation. His discretion and affection would comprehend the thing which she herself felt and which affection not combined with discretion might not take in. He would understand, when she told him that one of the first things which had struck her, had been that Rosy herself, her helplessness and timidity, might, for a period at least, form obstacles in their path of action. He not only loved Rosy, but realised how slight a sweet thing she had always been, and he would know how far a slight creature's gentleness might be overpowered and beaten down.

There was so much that her mother must be spared, there was indeed so little that it would be wise to tell her, that Bettina sat gently rubbing her forehead as she thought of it. The truth was that she must

tell her nothing, until all was over, accomplished, decided. Whatsoever there was to be "over," whatsoever the action finally taken, must be a matter lying as far as possible between her father and herself. Mrs. Vanderpoel's trouble would be too keen, her anxiety too great to keep to herself, even if she were not overwhelmed by them. She must be told of the beauties and dimensions of Stornham, all relatable details of Rosy's life must be generously dwelt on. Above all Rosy must be made to write letters, and with an air of freedom however specious.

A knock on the door broke the thread of her reflection. It was a low-sounding knock, and she answered the summons herself, because she thought it might be Rosy's.

It was not Lady Anstruthers who stood outside, but Ughtred, who balanced himself on his crutches, and lifted his small, too mature, face.

"May I come in?" he asked.

Here was the unexpected again, but she did not allow him to see her surprise.

"Yes," she said. "Certainly you may."

He swung in and then turned to speak to her.

"Please shut the door and lock it," he said.

There was sudden illumination in this, but of an order almost whimsical. That modern people in modern days should feel bolts and bars a necessity of ordinary intercourse was suggestive. She was plainly about to receive enlightenment. She turned the key and followed the halting figure across the room.

"What are you afraid of?" she asked.

"When mother and I talk things over," he said, "we always do it where no one can see or hear. It's the only way to be safe."

"Safe from what?"

His eyes fixed themselves on her as he answered her almost sullenly.

"Safe from people who might listen and go and tell that we had been talking."

In his thwarted-looking, odd child-face there was a shade of appeal not wholly hidden by his evident wish not to be boylike. Betty felt a desire to kneel down suddenly and embrace him, but she knew he was not prepared for such a demonstration. He looked like a creature who had lived continually at bay, and had learned to adjust himself to any situation with caution and restraint.

"Sit down, Ughtred," she said, and when he did so she herself sat down, but not too near him.

Resting his chin on the handle of a crutch, he gazed at her almost protestingly.

"I always have to do these things," he said, "and I am not clever enough, or old enough. I am only eleven."

The mention of the number of his years was plainly not apologetic, but was a mere statement of his limitations. There the fact was, and he must make the best of it he could.

"What things do you mean?"

"Trying to make things easier--explaining things when she cannot think of excuses. To-day it is telling you what she is too frightened to tell you herself. I said to her that you must be told. It made her nervous and miserable, but I knew you must."

"Yes, I must," Betty answered. "I am glad she has you to depend on, Ughtred."

His crutch grated on the floor and his boy eyes forbade her to believe that their sudden lustre was in any way connected with restrained

emotion.

"I know I seem queer and like a little old man," he said. "Mother cries about it sometimes. But it can't be helped. It is because she has never had anyone but me to help her. When I was very little, I found out how frightened and miserable she was. After his rages," he used no name, "she used to run into my nursery and snatch me up in her arms and hide her face in my pinafore. Sometimes she stuffed it into her mouth and bit it to keep herself from screaming. Once--before I was seven--I ran into their room and shouted out, and tried to fight for her. He was going out, and had his riding whip in his hand, and he caught hold of me and struck me with it--until he was tired."

Betty stood upright.

"What! What! What!" she cried out.

He merely nodded his head shortly. She saw what the thing had been by the way his face lost colour.

"Of course he said it was because I was impudent, and needed punishment," he said. "He said she had encouraged me in American impudence. It was worse for her than for me. She kneeled down and screamed out as if she was crazy, that she would give him what he wanted if he would stop."

"Wait," said Betty, drawing in her breath sharply. "'He,' is Sir Nigel? And he wanted something."

He nodded again

"Tell me," she demanded, "has he ever struck her?"

"Once," he answered slowly, "before I was born--he struck her and she fell against something. That is why I am like this." And he touched his shoulder.

The feeling which surged through Betty Vanderpoel's being forced her to go and stand with her face turned towards the windows, her hands holding each other tightly behind her back.

"I must keep still," she said. "I must make myself keep still."

She spoke unconsciously half aloud, and Ughtred heard her and replied hurriedly.

"Yes," he said, "you must make yourself keep still. That is what we have to do whatever happens. That is one of the things mother wanted you to know. She is afraid. She daren't let you----"

She turned from the window, standing at her full height and looking very tall for a girl.

"She is afraid? She daren't? See--that will come to an end now. There are things which can be done."

He flushed nervously.

"That is what she was afraid you would say," he spoke fast and his hands trembled. "She is nearly wild about it, because she knows he will try to do something that will make you feel as if she does not want you."

"She is afraid of that?" Betty exclaimed.

"He'd do it! He'd do it--if you did not know beforehand."

"Oh!" said Betty, with unflinching clearness. "He is a liar, is he?"

The helpless rage in the unchildish eyes, the shaking voice, as he cried out in answer, were a shock. It was as if he wildly rejoiced that she had spoken the word.

"Yes, he's a liar--a liar!" he shrilled. "He's a liar and a bully and a coward. He'd--he'd be a murderer if he dared--but he daren't." And his face dropped on his arms folded on his crutch, and he broke into a passion of crying. Then Betty knew she might go to him. She went and knelt down and put her arm round him.

"Ughtred," she said, "cry, if you like, I should do it, if I were you. But I tell you it can all be altered--and it shall be."

He seemed quite like a little boy when he put out his hand to hers and spoke sobbingly:

"She--she says--that because you have only just come from America--and in America people--can do things--you will think you can do things here--and you don't know. He will tell lies about you lies you can't bear. She sat wringing her hands when she thought of it. She won't let you be hurt because you want to help her." He stopped abruptly and clutched her shoulder.

"Aunt Betty! Aunt Betty--whatever happens--whatever he makes her seem like--you are to know that it is not true. Now you have come--now she has seen you it would KILL her if you were driven away and thought she wanted you to go."

"I shall not think that," she answered, slowly, because she realised that it was well that she had been warned in time. "Ughtred, are you trying to tell me that above all things I must not let him think that I came here to help you, because if he is angry he will make us all suffer--and your mother most of all?"

"He'll find a way. We always know he will. He would either be so rude that you would not stay here--or he would make mother seem rude--or he

would write lies to grandfather. Aunt Betty, she scarcely believes you are real yet. If she won't tell you things at first, please don't mind."
He looked quite like a child again in his appeal to her, to try to understand a state of affairs so complicated. "Could you--could you wait until you have let her get--get used to you?"

"Used to thinking that there may be someone in the world to help her?" slowly. "Yes, I will. Has anyone ever tried to help her?"

"Once or twice people found out and were sorry at first, but it only made it worse, because he made them believe things."

"I shall not TRY, Ughtred," said Betty, a remote spark kindling in the deeps of the pupils of her steel-blue eyes. "I shall not TRY. Now I am going to ask you some questions."

Before he left her she had asked many questions which were pertinent and searching, and she had learned things she realised she could have learned in no other way and from no other person. But for his uncanny sense of the responsibility he clearly had assumed in the days when he wore pinafores, and which had brought him to her room to prepare her mind for what she would find herself confronted with in the way of apparently unexplainable obstacles, there was a strong likelihood that at the outset she might have found herself more than once dangerously at a loss. Yes, she would have been at a loss, puzzled, perhaps greatly discouraged. She was face to face with a complication so extraordinary.

That one man, through mere persistent steadiness in evil temper and domestic tyranny, should have so broken the creatures of his household into abject submission and hopelessness, seemed too incredible. Such a power appeared as remote from civilised existence in London and New York as did that which had inflicted tortures in the dungeons of castles of old. Prisoners in such dungeons could utter no cry which could reach the outside world; the prisoners at Stornham Court, not four hours from Hyde Park Corner, could utter none the world could hear, or comprehend if it heard it. Sheer lack of power to resist bound them hand and foot. And she, Betty Vanderpoel, was here upon the spot, and, as far as she could understand, was being implored to take no steps, to do nothing. The atmosphere in which she had spent her life, the world she had been born into, had not made for fearfulness that one would be at any time defenceless against circumstances and be obliged to submit to outrage. To be a Vanderpoel was, it was true, to be a shining mark for envy as for admiration, but the fact removed obstacles as a rule, and to find one's self standing before a situation with one's hands, figuratively speaking, tied, was new enough to arouse unusual sensations. She recalled, with an ironic sense of bewilderment, as a sort of material evidence of her own reality, the fact that not a week ago she had stepped on to English soil from the gangway of a solid Atlantic liner. It aided her to resist the feeling that she had been swept back into the Middle Ages.

"When he is angry," was one of the first questions she put to Ughtred,

"what does he give as his reason? He must profess to have a reason."

"When he gets in a rage he says it is because mother is silly and common, and I am badly brought up. But we always know he wants money, and it makes him furious. He could kill us with rage."

"Oh!" said Betty. "I see."

"It began that time when he struck her. He said then that it was not decent that a woman who was married should keep her own money. He made her give him almost everything she had, but she wants to keep some for me. He tries to make her get more from grandfather, but she will not write begging letters, and she won't give him what she is saving for me."

It was a simple and sordid enough explanation in one sense, and it was one of which Bettina had known, not one parallel, but several. Having married to ensure himself power over unquestioned resources, the man had felt himself disgustingly taken in, and avenged himself accordingly. In him had been born the makings of a domestic tyrant who, even had he been favoured by fortune, would have wreaked his humours upon the defenceless things made his property by ties of blood and marriage, and who, being unfavoured, would do worse. Betty could see what the years had held for Rosy, and how her weakness and timidity had been considered as positive assets. A woman who will cry when she is bullied, may be counted upon to

submit after she has cried. Rosy had submitted up to a certain point and then, with the stubbornness of a weak creature, had stood at timid bay for her young.

What Betty gathered was that, after the long and terrible illness which had followed Ughtred's birth, she had risen from what had been so nearly her deathbed, prostrated in both mind and body. Ughtred did not know all that he revealed when he touched upon the time which he said his mother could not quite remember--when she had sat for months staring vacantly out of her window, trying to recall something terrible which had happened, and which she wanted to tell her mother, if the day ever came when she could write to her again. She had never remembered clearly the details of the thing she had wanted to tell, and Nigel had insisted that her fancy was part of her past delirium. He had said that at the beginning of her delirium she had attacked and insulted his mother and himself but they had excused her because they realised afterwards what the cause of her excitement had been. For a long time she had been too brokenly weak to question or disbelieve, but, later she had vaguely known that he had been lying to her, though she could not refute what he said. She recalled, in course of time, a horrible scene in which all three of them had raved at each other, and she herself had shrieked and laughed and hurled wild words at Nigel, and he had struck her. That she knew and never forgot. She had been ill a year, her hair had fallen out, her skin had faded and she had begun to feel like a nervous, tired old woman instead of a girl. Girlhood, with all the past, had become unreal and too far away to be more than a dream. Nothing had remained real but

Stornham and Nigel and the little hunchbacked baby. She was glad when the Dowager died and when Nigel spent his time in London or on the Continent and left her with Ughtred. When he said that he must spend her money on the estate, she had acquiesced without comment, because that insured his going away. She saw that no improvement or repairs were made, but she could do nothing and was too listless to make the attempt. She only wanted to be left alone with Ughtred, and she exhibited willpower only in defence of her child and in her obstinacy with regard to asking money of her father.

"She thought, somehow, that grandfather and grandmother did not care for her any more--that they had forgotten her and only cared for you," Ughtred explained. "She used to talk to me about you. She said you must be so clever and so handsome that no one could remember her. Sometimes she cried and said she did not want any of you to see her again, because she was only a hideous, little, thin, yellow old woman. When I was very little she told me stories about New York and Fifth Avenue. I thought they were not real places--I though they were places in fairyland."

Betty patted his shoulder and looked away for a moment when he said this. In her remote and helpless loneliness, to Rosy's homesick, yearning soul, noisy, rattling New York, Fifth Avenue with its traffic and people, its brown-stone houses and ricketty stages, had seemed like THAT--so splendid and bright and heart-filling, that she had painted them in colours which could belong only to fairyland. It said so much.

The thing she had suspected as she had talked to her sister was, before the interview ended, made curiously clear. The first obstacle in her pathway would be the shrinking of a creature who had been so long under dominion that the mere thought of seeing any steps taken towards her rescue filled her with alarm. One might be prepared for her almost praying to be let alone, because she felt that the process of her salvation would bring about such shocks and torments as she could not endure the facing of.

"She will have to get used to you," Ughtred kept saying. "She will have to get used to thinking things."

"I will be careful," Bettina answered. "She shall not be troubled. I did not come to trouble her."