CHAPTER XIII

ONE OF THE NEW YORK DRESSES

As she went down the staircase later, on her way to dinner, Miss Vanderpoel saw on all sides signs of the extent of the nakedness of the land. She was in a fine old house, stripped of most of its saleable belongings, uncared for, deteriorating year by year, gradually going to ruin. One need not possess particular keenness of sight to observe this, and she had chanced to see old houses in like condition in other countries than England. A man-servant, in a shabby livery, opened the drawing-room door for her. He was not a picturesque servitor of fallen fortunes, but an awkward person who was not accustomed to his duties. Betty wondered if he had been called in from the gardens to meet the necessities of the moment. His furtive glance at the tall young woman who passed him, took in with sudden embarrassment the fact that she plainly did not belong to the dispirited world bounded by Stornham Court. Without sparkling gems or trailing richness in her wake, she was suggestively splendid. He did not know whether it was her hair or the build of her neck and shoulders that did it, but it was revealed to him that tiaras and collars of stones which blazed belonged without doubt to her equipment. He recalled that there was a legend to the effect that the present Lady Anstruthers, who looked like a rag doll, had been the daughter of a rich American, and that better things might have been expected of her if she had not been such a poor-spirited creature. If this was her sister, she perhaps was a young woman of fortune, and that

she was not of poor spirit was plain.

The large drawing-room presented but another aspect of the bareness of the rest of the house. In times probably long past, possibly in the Dowager Lady Anstruthers' early years of marriage, the walls had been hung with white and gold paper of a pattern which dominated the scene, and had been furnished with gilded chairs, tables, and ottomans. Some of these last had evidently been removed as they became too much out of repair for use or ornament. Such as remained, tarnished as to gilding and worn in the matter of upholstery, stood sparsely scattered on a desert of carpet, whose huge, flowered medallions had faded almost from view.

Lady Anstruthers, looking shy and awkward as she fingered an ornament on a small table, seemed singularly a part of her background. Her evening dress, slipping off her thin shoulders, was as faded and out of date as her carpet. It had once been delicately blue and gauzy, but its gauziness hung in crushed folds and its blue was almost grey. It was also the dress of a girl, not that of a colourless, worn woman, and her consciousness of its unfitness showed in her small-featured face as she came forward.

"Do you--recognise it, Betty?" she asked hesitatingly. "It was one of my New York dresses. I put it on because--because----" and her stammering ended helplessly.

"Because you wanted to remind me," Betty said. If she felt it easier to begin with an excuse she should be provided with one.

Perhaps but for this readiness to fall into any tone she chose to adopt Rosy might have endeavoured to carry her poor farce on, but as it was she suddenly gave it up.

"I put it on because I have no other," she said. "We never have visitors and I haven't dressed for dinner for so long that I seem to have nothing left that is fit to wear. I dragged this out because it was better than anything else. It was pretty once----" she gave a little laugh, "twelve years ago. How long years seem! Was I--was I pretty, Betty--twelve years ago?"

"Twelve years is not such a long time." Betty took her hand and drew her to a sofa. "Let us sit down and talk about it."

"There is nothing much to talk about. This is it----" taking in the room with a wave of her hand. "I am it. Ughtred is it."

"Then let us talk about England," was Bettina's light skim over the thin ice.

A red spot grew on each of Lady Anstruthers' cheek bones and made her faded eyes look intense.

"Let us talk about America," her little birdclaw of a hand clinging feverishly. "Is New York still--still----"

"It is still there," Betty answered with one of the adorable smiles which showed a deep dimple near her lip. "But it is much nearer England than it used to be."

"Nearer!" The hand tightened as Rosy caught her breath.

Betty bent rather suddenly and kissed her. It was the easiest way of hiding the look she knew had risen to her eyes. She began to talk gaily, half laughingly.

"It is quite near," she said. "Don't you realise it? Americans swoop over here by thousands every year. They come for business, they come for pleasure, they come for rest. They cannot keep away. They come to buy and sell--pictures and books and luxuries and lands. They come to give and take. They are building a bridge from shore to shore of their work, and their thoughts, and their plannings, out of the lives and souls of them. It will be a great bridge and great things will pass over it."
She kissed the faded cheek again. She wanted to sweep Rosy away from the dreariness of "it." Lady Anstruthers looked at her with faintly smiling eyes. She did not follow all this quite readily, but she felt pleased and vaguely comforted.

"I know how they come here and marry," she said. "The new Duchess of

Downes is an American. She had a fortune of two million pounds."

"If she chooses to rebuild a great house and a great name," said Betty, lifting her shoulders lightly, "why not--if it is an honest bargain? I suppose it is part of the building of the bridge."

Little Lady Anstruthers, trying to pull up the sleeves of the gauzy bodice slipping off her small, sharp bones, stared at her half in wondering adoration, half in alarm.

"Betty--you--you are so handsome--and so clever and strange," she fluttered. "Oh, Betty, stand up so that I can see how tall and handsome you are!"

Betty did as she was told, and upon her feet she was a young woman of long lines, and fine curves so inspiring to behold that Lady Anstruthers clasped her hands together on her knees in an excited gesture.

"Oh, yes! Oh, yes!" she cried. "You are just as wonderful as you looked when I turned and saw you under the trees. You almost make me afraid."

"Because I am wonderful?" said Betty. "Then I will not be wonderful any more."

"It is not because I think you wonderful, but because other people will. Would you rebuild a great house?" hesitatingly.

The fine line of Betty's black brows drew itself slightly together.

"No," she said.

"Wouldn't you?"

"How could the man who owned it persuade me that he was in earnest if he said he loved me? How could I persuade him that I was worth caring for and not a mere ambitious fool? There would be too much against us."

"Against you?" repeated Lady Anstruthers.

"I don't say I am fair," said Betty. "People who are proud are often not fair. But we should both of us have seen and known too much."

"You have seen me now," said Lady Anstruthers in her listless voice, and at the same moment dinner was announced and she got up from the sofa, so
that, luckily, there was no time for the impersonal answer it would have been difficult to invent at a moment's notice. As they went into the dining-room Betty was thinking restlessly. She remembered all the material she had collected during her education in France and Germany, and there was added to it the fact that she HAD seen Rosy, and having her before her eyes she felt that there was small prospect of

her contemplating the rebuilding of any great house requiring reconstruction.

There was fine panelling in the dining-room and a great fireplace and a few family portraits. The service upon the table was shabby and the dinner was not a bounteous meal. Lady Anstruthers in her girlish, gauzy dress and looking too small for her big, high-backed chair tried to talk rapidly, and every few minutes forgot herself and sank into silence, with her eyes unconsciously fixed upon her sister's face. Ughtred watched Betty also, and with a hungry questioning. The man-servant in the worn livery was not a sufficiently well-trained and experienced domestic to make any effort to keep his eyes from her. He was young enough to be excited by an innovation so unusual as the presence of a young and beautiful person surrounded by an unmistakable atmosphere of ease and fearlessness. He had been talking of her below stairs and felt that he had failed in describing her. He had found himself barely supported by the suggestion of a housemaid that sometimes these dresses that looked plain had been made in Paris at expensive places and had cost "a lot." He furtively examined the dress which looked plain, and while he admitted that for some mysterious reason it might represent expensiveness, it was not the dress which was the secret of the effect, but a something, not altogether mere good looks, expressed by the wearer. It was, in fact, the thing which the second-class passenger, Salter, had been at once attracted and stirred to rebellion by when Miss Vanderpoel came on board the Meridiana.

Betty did not look too small for her high-backed chair, and she did not forget herself when she talked. In spite of all she had found, her imagination was stirred by the surroundings. Her sense of the fine spaces and possibilities of dignity in the barren house, her knowledge that outside the windows there lay stretched broad views of the park and its heavy-branched trees, and that outside the gates stood the neglected picturesqueness of the village and all the rural and--to her--interesting life it slowly lived--this pleased and attracted her.

If she had been as helpless and discouraged as Rosalie she could see that it would all have meant a totally different and depressing thing, but, strong and spirited, and with the power of full hands, she was remotely rejoicing in what might be done with it all. As she talked she was gradually learning detail. Sir Nigel was on the Continent. Apparently he often went there; also it revealed itself that no one knew at what moment he might return, for what reason he would return, or if he would return at all during the summer. It was evident that no one had been at any time encouraged to ask questions as to his intentions, or to feel that they had a right to do so.

This she knew, and a number of other things, before they left the table. When they did so they went out to stroll upon the moss-grown stone terrace and listened to the nightingales throwing 'm into the air silver fountains of trilling song. When Bettina paused, leaning against the balustrade of the terrace that she might hear all the beauty of it, and feel all the beauty of the warm spring night, Rosy went on making her

effort to talk.

"It is not much of a neighbourhood, Betty," she said. "You are too accustomed to livelier places to like it."

"That is my reason for feeling that I shall like it. I don't think I could be called a lively person, and I rather hate lively places."

"But you are accustomed--accustomed----" Rosy harked back uncertainly.

"I have been accustomed to wishing that I could come to you," said Betty. "And now I am here."

Lady Anstruthers laid a hand on her dress.

"I can't believe it! I can't believe it!" she breathed.

"You will believe it," said Betty, drawing the hand around her waist and enclosing in her own arm the narrow shoulders. "Tell me about the neighbourhood."

"There isn't any, really," said Lady Anstruthers. "The houses are so far away from each other. The nearest is six miles from here, and it is one that doesn't count.

"Why?"

"There is no family, and the man who owns it is so poor. It is a big place, but it is falling to pieces as this is.

"What is it called?"

"Mount Dunstan. The present earl only succeeded about three years ago. Nigel doesn't know him. He is queer and not liked. He has been away."

"Where?"

"No one knows. To Australia or somewhere. He has odd ideas. The Mount Dunstans have been awful people for two generations. This man's father was almost mad with wickedness. So was the elder son. This is a second son, and he came into nothing but debt. Perhaps he feels the disgrace and it makes him rude and ill-tempered. His father and elder brother had been in such scandals that people did not invite them.

"Do they invite this man?"

"No. He probably would not go to their houses if they did. And he went away soon after he came into the title."

"Is the place beautiful?"

"There is a fine deer park, and the gardens were wonderful a long time

ago. The house is worth looking at--outside."

"I will go and look at it," said Betty.

"The carriage is out of order. There is only Ughtred's cart."

"I am a good walker," said Betty.

"Are you? It would be twelve miles--there and back. When I was in New York people didn't walk much, particularly girls."

"They do now," Betty answered. "They have learned to do it in England. They live out of doors and play games. They have grown athletic and tall."

As they talked the nightingales sang, sometimes near, sometimes in the distance, and scents of dewy grass and leaves and earth were wafted towards them. Sometimes they strolled up and down the terrace, sometimes they paused and leaned against the stone balustrade. Betty allowed Rosy to talk as she chose. She herself asked no obviously leading questions and passed over trying moments with lightness. Her desire was to place herself in a position where she might hear the things which would aid her to draw conclusions. Lady Anstruthers gradually grew less nervous and afraid of her subjects. In the wonder of the luxury of talking to someone who listened with sympathy, she once or twice almost forgot herself and made revelations she had not intended to make. She had often

the manner of a person who was afraid of being overheard; sometimes, even when she was making speeches quite simple in themselves, her voice dropped and she glanced furtively aside as if there were chances that something she dreaded might step out of the shadow.

When they went upstairs together and parted for the night, the clinging of Rosy's embrace was for a moment almost convulsive. But she tried to laugh off its suggestion of intensity.

"I held you tight so that I could feel sure that you were real and would not melt away," she said. "I hope you will be here in the morning."

"I shall never really go quite away again, now I have come," Betty answered. "It is not only your house I have come into. I have come back into your life."

After she had entered her room and locked the door she sat down and wrote a letter to her father. It was a long letter, but a clear one.
She painted a definite and detailed picture and made distinct her chief point.

"She is afraid of me," she wrote. "That is the first and worst obstacle.
She is actually afraid that I will do something which will only add to her trouble. She has lived under dominion so long that she has forgotten that there are people who have no reason for fear. Her old life seems nothing but a dream. The first thing I must teach her is that I am to be

trusted not to do futile things, and that she need neither be afraid of nor for me."

After writing these sentences she found herself leaving her desk and walking up and down the room to relieve herself. She could not sit still, because suddenly the blood ran fast and hot through her veins. She put her hands against her cheeks and laughed a little, low laugh.

"I feel violent," she said. "I feel violent and I must get over it. This is rage. Rage is worth nothing."

It was rage--the rage of splendid hot blood which surged in answer to leaping hot thoughts. There would have been a sort of luxury in giving way to the sway of it. But the self-indulgence would have been no aid to future action. Rage was worth nothing. She said it as the first Reuben Vanderpoel might have said of a useless but glittering weapon. "This gun is worth nothing," and cast it aside.