CHAPTER XIV

IN THE GARDENS

She came out upon the stone terrace again rather early in the morning. She wanted to wander about in the first freshness of the day, which was always an uplifting thing to her. She wanted to see the dew on the grass and on the ragged flower borders and to hear the tender, broken fluting of birds in the trees. One cuckoo was calling to another in the park, and she stopped and listened intently. Until yesterday she had never heard a cuckoo call, and its hollow mellowness gave her delight. It meant the spring in England, and nowhere else.

There was space enough to ramble about in the gardens. Paths and beds were alike overgrown with weeds, but some strong, early-blooming things were fighting for life, refusing to be strangled. Against the beautiful old red walls, over which age had stolen with a wonderful grey bloom, venerable fruit trees were spread and nailed, and here and there showed bloom, clumps of low-growing things sturdily advanced their yellowness or whiteness, as if defying neglect. In one place a wall slanted and threatened to fall, bearing its nectarine trees with it; in another there was a gap so evidently not of to-day that the heap of its masonry upon the border bed was already covered with greenery, and the roots of the fruit tree it had supported had sent up strong, insistent shoots.

She passed down broad paths and narrow ones, sometimes walking under

trees, sometimes pushing her way between encroaching shrubs; she descended delightful mossy and broken steps and came upon dilapidated urns, in which weeds grew instead of flowers, and over which rampant but lovely, savage little creepers clambered and clung.

In one of the walled kitchen gardens she came upon an elderly gardener at work. At the sound of her approaching steps he glanced round and then stood up, touching his forelock in respectful but startled salute. He was so plainly amazed at the sight of her that she explained herself.

"Good-morning," she said. "I am her ladyship's sister, Miss Vanderpoel. I came yesterday evening. I am looking over your gardens."

He touched his forehead again and looked round him. His manner was not cheerful. He cast a troubled eye about him.

"They're not much to see, miss," he said. "They'd ought to be, but they're not. Growing things has to be fed and took care of. A man and a boy can't do it--nor yet four or five of 'em."

"How many ought there to be?" Betty inquired, with business-like directness. It was not only the dew on the grass she had come out to see.

"If there was eight or ten of us we might put it in order and keep it that way. It's a big place, miss."

Betty looked about her as he had done, but with a less discouraged eye.

"It is a beautiful place, as well as a large one," she said. "I can see that there ought to be more workers."

"There's no one," said the gardener, "as has as many enemies as a gardener, an' as many things to fight. There's grubs an' there's greenfly, an' there's drout', an' wet an' cold, an' mildew, an' there's what the soil wants and starves without, an' if you haven't got it nor yet hands an' feet an' tools enough, how's things to feed, an' fight an' live--let alone bloom an' bear?"

"I don't know much about gardens," said Miss Vanderpoel, "but I can understand that."

The scent of fresh bedewed things was in the air. It was true that she had not known much about gardens, but here standing in the midst of one she began to awaken to a new, practical interest. A creature of initiative could not let such a place as this alone. It was beauty being slowly slain. One could not pass it by and do nothing.

"What is your name?" she asked

"Kedgers, miss. I've only been here about a twelve-month. I was took on because I'm getting on in years an' can't ask much wage."

"Can you spare time to take me through the gardens and show me things?"

Yes, he could do it. In truth, he privately welcomed an opportunity offering a prospect of excitement so novel. He had shown more flourishing gardens to other young ladies in his past years of service, but young ladies did not come to Stornham, and that one having, with such extraordinary unexpectedness arrived, should want to look over the desolation of these, was curious enough to rouse anyone to a sense of a break in accustomed monotony. The young lady herself mystified him by her difference from such others as he had seen. What the man in the shabby livery had felt, he felt also, and added to this was a sense of the practicalness of the questions she asked and the interest she showed and a way she had of seeming singularly to suggest by the look in her eyes and the tone of her voice that nothing was necessarily without remedy. When her ladyship walked through the place and looked at things, a pale resignation expressed itself in the very droop of her figure. When this one walked through the tumbled-down grape-houses, potting-sheds and conservatories, she saw where glass was broken, where benches had fallen and where roofs sagged and leaked. She inquired about the heating apparatus and asked that she might see it. She asked about the village and its resources, about labourers and their wages.

"As if," commented Kedgers mentally, "she was what Sir Nigel is--leastways what he'd ought to be an' ain't."

She led the way back to the fallen wall and stood and looked at it.

"It's a beautiful old wall," she said. "It should be rebuilt with the old brick. New would spoil it."

"Some of this is broken and crumbled away," said Kedgers, picking up a piece to show it to her.

"Perhaps old brick could be bought somewhere," replied the young lady speculatively. "One ought to be able to buy old brick in England, if one is willing to pay for it."

Kedgers scratched his head and gazed at her in respectful wonder which was almost trouble. Who was going to pay for things, and who was going to look for things which were not on the spot? Enterprise like this was not to be explained.

When she left him he stood and watched her upright figure disappear through the ivy-grown door of the kitchen gardens with a disturbed but elated expression on his countenance. He did not know why he felt elated, but he was conscious of elation. Something new had walked into the place. He stopped his work and grinned and scratched his head several times after he went back to his pottering among the cabbage plants.

"My word," he muttered. "She's a fine, straight young woman. If she

was her ladyship things 'ud be different. Sir Nigel 'ud be different, too--or there'd be some fine upsets."

There was a huge stable yard, and Betty passed through that on her way back. The door of the carriage house was open and she saw two or three tumbled-down vehicles. One was a landau with a wheel off, one was a shabby, old-fashioned, low phaeton. She caught sight of a patently venerable cob in one of the stables. The stalls near him were empty.

"I suppose that is all they have to depend upon," she thought. "And the stables are like the gardens."

She found Lady Anstruthers and Ughtred waiting for her upon the terrace, each of them regarding her with an expression suggestive of repressed curiosity as she approached. Lady Anstruthers flushed a little and went to meet her with an eager kiss.

"You look like--I don't know quite what you look like, Betty!" she exclaimed.

The girl's dimple deepened and her eyes said smiling things.

"It is the morning--and your gardens," she answered. "I have been round your gardens."

"They were beautiful once, I suppose," said Rosy deprecatingly.

"They are beautiful now. There is nothing like them in America at least."

"I don't remember any gardens in America," Lady Anstruthers owned reluctantly, "but everything seemed so cheerful and well cared for and--and new. Don't laugh, Betty. I have begun to like new things. You would if you had watched old ones tumbling to pieces for twelve years."

"They ought not to be allowed to tumble to pieces," said Betty. She added her next words with simple directness. She could only discover how any advancing steps would be taken by taking them. "Why do you allow them to do it?"

Lady Anstruthers looked away, but as she looked her eyes passed Ughtred's.

"I!" she said. "There are so many other things to do. It would cost so much--such an enormity to keep it all in order."

"But it ought to be done--for Ughtred's sake."

"I know that," faltered Rosy, "but I can't help it."

"You can," answered Betty, and she put her arm round her as they turned to enter the house. "When you have become more used to me and my driving

American ways I will show you how."

The lightness with which she said it had an odd effect on Lady Anstruthers. Such casual readiness was so full of the suggestion of unheard of possibilities that it was a kind of shock.

"I have been twelve years in getting un-used to you--I feel as if it would take twelve years more to get used again," she said.

"It won't take twelve weeks," said Betty.