CHAPTER XVII

TOWNLINSON & SHEPPARD

During the whole course of her interesting life--and she had always found life interesting--Betty Vanderpoel decided that she had known no experience more absorbing than this morning spent in going over the long-closed and deserted portions of the neglected house. She had never seen anything like the place, or as full of suggestion. The greater part of it had simply been shut up and left to time and weather, both of which had had their effects. The fine old red roof, having lost tiles, had fallen into leaks that let in rain, which had stained and rotted walls, plaster, and woodwork; wind and storm had beaten through broken window panes and done their worst with such furniture and hangings as they found to whip and toss and leave damp and spotted with mould. They passed through corridors, and up and down short or long stairways, with stained or faded walls, and sometimes with cracked or fallen plastering and wainscotting. Here and there the oak flooring itself was uncertain. The rooms, whether large or small, all presented a like aspect of potential beauty and comfort, utterly uncared for and forlorn. There were many rooms, but none more than scantily furnished, and a number of them were stripped bare. Betty found herself wondering how long a time it had taken the belongings of the big place to dwindle and melt away into such bareness.

"There was a time, I suppose, when it was all furnished," she said.

"All these rooms were shut up when I came here," Rosy answered. "I suppose things worth selling have been sold. When pieces of furniture were broken in one part of the house, they were replaced by things brought from another. No one cared. Nigel hates it all. He calls it a rathole. He detests the country everywhere, but particularly this part of it. After the first year I had learned better than to speak to him of spending money on repairs."

"A good deal of money should be spent on repairs," reflected Betty, looking about her.

She was standing in the middle of a room whose walls were hung with the remains of what had been chintz, covered with a pattern of loose clusters of moss rosebuds. The dampness had rotted it until, in some places, it had fallen away in strips from its fastenings. A quaint, embroidered couch stood in one corner, and as Betty looked at it, a mouse crept from under the tattered valance, stared at her in alarm and suddenly darted back again, in terror of intrusion so unusual. A casement window swung open, on a broken hinge, and a strong branch of ivy, having forced its way inside, had thrown a covering of leaves over the deep ledge, and was beginning to climb the inner woodwork. Through the casement was to be seen a heavenly spread of country, whose rolling lands were clad softly in green pastures and thick-branched trees.

"This is the Rosebud Boudoir," said Lady Anstruthers, smiling faintly.

"All the rooms have names. I thought them so delightful, when I first heard them. The Damask Room--the Tapestry Room--the White Wainscot Room--My Lady's Chamber. It almost broke my heart when I saw what they looked like."

"It would be very interesting," Betty commented slowly, "to make them look as they ought to look."

A remote fear rose to the surface of the expression in Lady Anstruthers' eyes. She could not detach herself from certain recollections of Nigel--of his opinions of her family--of his determination not to allow it to enter as a factor in either his life or hers. And Betty had come to Stornham--Betty whom he had detested as a child--and in the course of two days, she had seemed to become a new part of the atmosphere, and to make the dead despair of the place begin to stir with life. What other thing than this was happening as she spoke of making such rooms as the Rosebud Boudoir "look as they ought to look," and said the words not as if they were part of a fantastic vision, but as if they expressed a perfectly possible thing?

Betty saw the doubt in her eyes, and in a measure, guessed at its meaning. The time to pause for argument had, however not arrived. There was too much to be investigated, too much to be seen. She swept her on her way. They wandered on through some forty rooms, more or less; they opened doors and closed them; they unbarred shutters and let the sun stream in on dust and dampness and cobwebs. The comprehension of the

situation which Betty gained was as valuable as it was enlightening.

The descent into the lower part of the house was a new experience. Betty had not before seen huge, flagged kitchens, vaulted servants' halls, stone passages, butteries and dairies. The substantial masonry of the walls and arched ceilings, the stone stairway, and the seemingly endless offices, were interestingly remote in idea from such domestic modernities as chance views of up-to-date American household workings had provided her.

In the huge kitchen itself, an elderly woman, rolling pastry, paused to curtsy to them, with stolid curiosity in her heavy-featured face. In her character as "single-handed" cook, Mrs. Noakes had sent up uninviting meals to Lady Anstruthers for several years, but she had not seen her ladyship below stairs before. And this was the unexpected arrival--the young lady there had been "talk of" from the moment of her appearance. Mrs. Noakes admitted with the grudgingness of a person of uncheerful temperament, that looks like that always would make talk. A certain degree of vague mental illumination led her to agree with Robert, the footman, that the stranger's effectiveness was, perhaps, also, not altogether a matter of good looks, and certainly it was not an affair of clothes. Her brightish blue dress, of rough cloth, was nothing particular, notwithstanding the fit of it. There was "something else about her." She looked round the place, not with the casual indifference of a fine young lady, carelessly curious to see what she had not seen before, but with an alert, questioning interest.

"What a big place," she said to her ladyship. "What substantial walls! What huge joints must have been roasted before such a fireplace."

She drew near to the enormous, antiquated cooking place.

"People were not very practical when this was built," she said. "It looks as if it must waste a great deal of coal. Is it----?" she looked at Mrs. Noakes. "Do you like it?"

There was a practical directness in the question for which Mrs. Noakes was not prepared. Until this moment, it had apparently mattered little whether she liked things or not. The condition of her implements of trade was one of her grievances--the ancient fireplace and ovens the bitterest.

"It's out of order, miss," she answered. "And they don't use 'em like this in these days."

"I thought not," said Miss Vanderpoel.

She made other inquiries as direct and significant of the observing eye, and her passage through the lower part of the establishment left Mrs. Noakes and her companions in a strange but not unpleasurable state of ferment.

"Think of a young lady that's never had nothing to do with kitchens, going straight to that shameful old fireplace, and seeing what it meant to the woman that's got to use it. 'Do you like it?' she says. If she'd been a cook herself, she couldn't have put it straighter. She's got eyes."

"She's been using them all over the place," said Robert. "Her and her ladyship's been into rooms that's not been opened for years."

"More shame to them that should have opened 'em," remarked Mrs. Noakes. "Her ladyship's a poor, listless thing--but her spirit was broken long ago.

"This one will mend it for her, perhaps," said the man servant. "I wonder what's going to happen."

"Well, she's got a look with her--the new one--as if where she was things would be likely to happen. You look out. The place won't seem so dead and alive if we've got something to think of and expect."

"Who are the solicitors Sir Nigel employs?" Betty had asked her sister, when their pilgrimage through the house had been completed.

Messrs. Townlinson & Sheppard, a firm which for several generations had transacted the legal business of much more important estates than Stornham, held its affairs in hand. Lady Anstruthers knew nothing of

them, but that they evidently did not approve of the conduct of their client. Nigel was frequently angry when he spoke of them. It could be gathered that they had refused to allow him to do things he wished to do--sell things, or borrow money on them.

"I think we must go to London and see them," Betty suggested.

Rosy was agitated. Why should one see them? What was there to be spoken of? Their going, Betty explained would be a sort of visit of ceremony--in a measure a precaution. Since Sir Nigel was apparently not to be reached, having given no clue as to where he intended to go, it might be discreet to consult Messrs. Townlinson & Sheppard with regard to the things it might be well to do--the repairs it appeared necessary to make at once. If Messrs. Townlinson & Sheppard approved of the doing of such work, Sir Nigel could not resent their action, and say that in his absence liberties had been taken. Such a course seemed businesslike and dignified.

It was what Betty felt that her father would do. Nothing could be complained of, which was done with the knowledge and under the sanction of the family solicitors.

"Then there are other things we must do. We must go to shops and theatres. It will be good for you to go to shops and theatres, Rosy."

"I have nothing but rags to wear," answered Lady Anstruthers, reddening.

"Then before we go we will have things sent down. People can be sent from the shops to arrange what we want."

The magic of the name, standing for great wealth, could, it was true, bring to them, not only the contents of shops, but the people who showed them, and were ready to carry out any orders. The name of Vanderpoel already stood, in London, for inexhaustible resource. Yes, it was simple enough to send for politely subservient saleswomen to bring what one wanted.

The being reminded in every-day matters of the still real existence of the power of this magic was the first step in the rebuilding of Lady Anstruthers. To realise that the wonderful and yet simple necromancy was gradually encircling her again, had its parallel in the taking of a tonic, whose effect was cumulative. She herself did not realise the working of it. But Betty regarded it with interest. She saw it was good for her, merely to look on at the unpacking of the New York boxes, which the maid, sent for from London, brought down with her.

As the woman removed, from tray after tray, the tissue-paper-enfolded layers of garments, Lady Anstruthers sat and watched her with normal, simply feminine interest growing in her eyes. The things were made with the absence of any limit in expenditure, the freedom with delicate stuffs and priceless laces which belonged only to her faint memories of a lost past.

Nothing had limited the time spent in the embroidering of this apparently simple linen frock and coat; nothing had restrained the hand holding the scissors which had cut into the lace which adorned in appliques and filmy frills this exquisitely charming ball dress.

"It is looking back so far," she said, waving her hand towards them with an odd gesture. "To think that it was once all like--like that."

She got up and went to the things, turning them over, and touching them with a softness, almost expressing a caress. The names of the makers stamped on bands and collars, the names of the streets in which their shops stood, moved her. She heard again the once familiar rattle of wheels, and the rush and roar of New York traffic.

Betty carried on the whole matter with lightness. She talked easily and casually, giving local colour to what she said. She described the abnormally rapid growth of the places her sister had known in her teens, the new buildings, new theatres, new shops, new people, the later mode of living, much of it learned from England, through the unceasing weaving of the Shuttle.

"Changing--changing--changing. That is what it is always doing--America. We have not reached repose yet. One wonders how long it will be before we shall. Now we are always hurrying breathlessly after the next thing--the new one--which we always think will be the better one. Other

countries built themselves slowly. In the days of their building, the pace of life was a march. When America was born, the march had already begun to hasten, and as a nation we began, in our first hour, at the quickening speed. Now the pace is a race. New York is a kaleidoscope. I myself can remember it a wholly different thing. One passes down a street one day, and the next there is a great gap where some building is being torn down--a few days later, a tall structure of some sort is touching the sky. It is wonderful, but it does not tend to calm the mind. That is why we cross the Atlantic so much. The sober, quiet-loving blood our forbears brought from older countries goes in search of rest. Mixed with other things, I feel in my own being a resentment against newness and disorder, and an insistence on the atmosphere of long-established things."

But for years Lady Anstruthers had been living in the atmosphere of long-established things, and felt no insistence upon it. She yearned to hear of the great, changing Western world--of the great, changing city. Betty must tell her what the changes were. What were the differences in the streets--where had the new buildings been placed? How had Fifth Avenue and Madison Avenue and Broadway altered? Were not Gramercy Park and Madison Square still green with grass and trees? Was it all different? Would she not know the old places herself? Though it seemed a lifetime since she had seen them, the years which had passed were really not so many.

It was good for her to talk and be talked to in this manner Betty saw.

Still handling her subject lightly, she presented picture after picture. Some of them were of the wonderful, feverish city itself--the place quite passionately loved by some, as passionately disliked by others. She herself had fallen into the habit, as she left childhood behind her, of looking at it with interested wonder--at its riot of life and power, of huge schemes, and almost superhuman labours, of fortunes so colossal that they seemed monstrosities in their relation to the world. People who in Rosalie's girlhood had lived in big ugly brownstone fronts, had built for themselves or for their children, houses such as, in other countries, would have belonged to nobles and princes, spending fortunes upon their building, filling them with treasures brought from foreign lands, from palaces, from art galleries, from collectors. Sometimes strange people built such houses and lived strange lavish, ostentatious lives in them, forming an overstrained, abnormal, pleasure-chasing world of their own. The passing of even ten years in New York counted itself almost as a generation; the fashions, customs, belongings of twenty years ago wore an air of almost picturesque antiquity.

"It does not take long to make an 'old New Yorker,'" she said. "Each day brings so many new ones."

There were, indeed, many new ones, Lady Anstruthers found. People who had been poor had become hugely rich, a few who had been rich had become poor, possessions which had been large had swelled to unnatural proportions. Out of the West had risen fortunes more monstrous than all others. As she told one story after another, Bettina realised, as she

had done often before, that it was impossible to enter into description of the life and movements of the place, without its curiously involving some connection with the huge wealth of it--with its influence, its rise, its swelling, or waning.

"Somehow one cannot free one's self from it. This is the age of wealth and invention--but of wealth before all else. Sometimes one is tired--tired of it."

"You would not be tired of it if--well, if you were I, said Lady Anstruthers rather pathetically.

"Perhaps not," Betty answered. "Perhaps not."

She herself had seen people who were not tired of it in the sense in which she was--the men and women, with worn or intently anxious faces, hastening with the crowds upon the pavements, all hastening somewhere, in chase of that small portion of the wealth which they earned by their labour as their daily share; the same men and women surging towards elevated railroad stations, to seize on places in the homeward-bound trains; or standing in tired-looking groups, waiting for the approach of an already overfull street car, in which they must be packed together, and swing to the hanging straps, to keep upon their feet. Their way of being weary of it would be different from hers, they would be weary only of hearing of the mountains of it which rolled themselves up, as it seemed, in obedience to some irresistible, occult force.

On the day after Stornham village had learned that her ladyship and Miss Vanderpoel had actually gone to London, the dignified firm of Townlinson & Sheppard received a visit which created some slight sensation in their establishment, though it had not been entirely unexpected. It had, indeed, been heralded by a note from Miss Vanderpoel herself, who had asked that the appointment be made. Men of Messrs. Townlinson & Sheppard's indubitable rank in their profession could not fail to know the significance of the Vanderpoel name. They knew and understood its weight perfectly well. When their client had married one of Reuben Vanderpoel's daughters, they had felt that extraordinary good fortune had befallen him and his estate. Their private opinion had been that Mr. Vanderpoel's knowledge of his son-in-law must have been limited, or that he had curiously lax American views of paternal duty. The firm was highly reputable, long established strictly conservative, and somewhat insular in its point of view. It did not understand, or seek to understand, America. It had excellent reasons for thoroughly understanding Sir Nigel Anstruthers. Its opinions of him it reserved to itself. If Messrs. Townlinson & Sheppard had been asked to give a daughter into their client's keeping, they would have flatly refused to accept the honour proposed. Mr. Townlinson had, indeed, at the time of the marriage, admitted in strict confidence to his partner that for his part he would have somewhat preferred to follow a daughter of his own to her tomb. After the marriage the firm had found the situation confusing and un-English. There had been trouble with Sir Nigel, who had plainly been disappointed. At first it had appeared that the American magnate

had shown astuteness in refraining from leaving his son-in-law a free hand. Lady Anstruthers' fortune was her own and not her husband's. Mr. Townlinson, paying a visit to Stornham and finding the bride a gentle, childish-looking girl, whose most marked expression was one of growing timorousness, had returned with a grave face. He foresaw the result, if her family did not stand by her with firmness, which he also foresaw her husband would prevent if possible. It became apparent that the family did not stand by her--or were cleverly kept at a distance. There was a long illness, which seemed to end in the seclusion from the world, brought about by broken health. Then it was certain that what Mr. Townlinson had foreseen had occurred. The inexperienced girl had been bullied into submission. Sir Nigel had gained the free hand, whatever the means he had chosen to employ. Most improper--most improper, the whole affair. He had a great deal of money, but none of it was used for the benefit of the estate--his deformed boy's estate. Advice, dignified remonstrance, resulted only in most disagreeable scenes. Messrs. Townlinson & Sheppard could not exceed certain limits. The manner in which the money was spent was discreditable. There were avenues a respectable firm knew only by rumour, there were insane gambling speculations, which could only end in disaster, there were things one could not decently concern one's self with. Lady Anstruthers' family had doubtless become indignant and disgusted, and had dropped the whole affair. Sad for the poor woman, but not unnatural.

And now appears a Miss Vanderpoel, who wishes to appoint an interview with Messrs. Townlinson & Sheppard. What does she wish to say? The

family is apparently taking the matter up. Is this lady an elder or a younger sister of Lady Anstruthers? Is she an older woman of that strong and rather trying American type one hears of, or is she younger than her ladyship, a pretty, indignant, totally unpractical girl, outraged by the state of affairs she has discovered, foolishly coming to demand of Messrs. Townlinson & Sheppard an explanation of things they are not responsible for? Will she, perhaps, lose her temper, and accuse and reproach, or even--most unpleasant to contemplate--shed hysterical tears?

It fell to Mr. Townlinson to receive her in the absence of Mr. Sheppard, who had been called to Northamptonshire to attend to great affairs. He was a stout, grave man with a heavy, well-cut face, and, when Bettina entered his room, his courteous reception of her reserved his view of the situation entirely.

She was not of the mature and rather alarming American type he had imagined possible, he felt some relief in marking at once. She was also not the pretty, fashionable young lady who might have come to scold him, and ask silly, irrational questions.

His ordinarily rather unillumined countenance changed somewhat in expression when she sat down and began to speak. Mr. Townlinson was impressed by the fact that it was at once unmistakably evident that whatsoever her reason for coming, she had not presented herself to ask irrelevant or unreasonable questions. Lady Anstruthers, she explained

without superfluous phrase, had no definite knowledge of her husband's whereabouts, and it had seemed possible that Messrs. Townlinson & Sheppard might have received some information more recent that her own. The impersonal framing of this inquiry struck Mr. Townlinson as being in remarkably good taste, since it conveyed no condemnation of Sir Nigel, and no desire to involve Mr. Townlinson in expressing any. It refrained even from implying that the situation was an unusual one, which might be open to criticism. Excellent reserve and great cleverness, Mr. Townlinson commented inwardly. There were certainly few young ladies who would have clearly realised that a solicitor cannot be called upon to commit himself, until he has had time to weigh matters and decide upon them. His long and varied experience had included interviews in which charming, emotional women had expected him at once to "take sides." Miss Vanderpoel exhibited no signs of expecting anything of this kind, even when she went on with what she had come to say. Stornham Court and its surroundings were depreciating seriously in value through need of radical repairs etc. Her sister's comfort was naturally involved, and, as Mr. Townlinson would fully understand, her nephew's future. The sooner the process of dilapidation was arrested, the better and with the less difficulty. The present time was without doubt better than an indefinite future. Miss Vanderpoel, having fortunately been able to come to Stornham, was greatly interested, and naturally desirous of seeing the work begun. Her father also would be interested. Since it was not possible to consult Sir Nigel, it had seemed proper to consult his solicitors in whose hands the estate had been for so long a time. She was aware, it seemed, that not only Mr. Townlinson, but Mr. Townlinson's

father, and also his grandfather, had legally represented the Anstruthers, as well as many other families. As there seemed no necessity for any structural changes, and the work done was such as could only rescue and increase the value of the estate, could there be any objection to its being begun without delay?

Certainly an unusual young lady. It would be interesting to discover how well she knew Sir Nigel, since it seemed that only a knowledge of him--his temper, his bitter, irritable vanity, could have revealed to her the necessity of the precaution she was taking without even intimating that it was a precaution. Extraordinarily clever girl.

Mr. Townlinson wore an air of quiet, business-like reflection.

"You are aware, Miss Vanderpoel, that the present income from the estate is not such as would justify anything approaching the required expenditure?"

"Yes, I am aware of that. The expense would be provided for by my father."

"Most generous on Mr. Vanderpoel's part," Mr. Townlinson commented. "The estate would, of course, increase greatly in value."

Circumstances had prevented her father from visiting Stornham, Miss Vanderpoel explained, and this had led to his being ignorant of a

condition of things which he might have remedied. She did not explain what the particular circumstances which had separated the families had been, but Mr. Townlinson thought he understood. The condition existing could be remedied now, if Messrs. Townlinson & Sheppard saw no obstacles other than scarcity of money.

Mr. Townlinson's summing up of the matter expressed in effect that he saw none. The estate had been a fine one in its day. During the last sixty years it had become much impoverished. With conservative decorum of manner, he admitted that there had not been, since Sir Nigel's marriage, sufficient reason for the neglect of dilapidations. The firm had strongly represented to Sir Nigel that certain resources should not be diverted from the proper object of restoring the property, which was entailed upon his son. The son's future should beyond all have been considered in the dispensing of his mother's fortune.

He, by this time, comprehended fully that he need restrain no dignified expression of opinion in his speech with this young lady. She had come to consult with him with as clear a view of the proprieties and discretions demanded by his position as he had himself. And yet each, before the close of the interview, understood the point of view of the other. What he recognised was that, though she had not seen Sir Nigel since her childhood, she had in some astonishing way obtained an extraordinary insight into his character, and it was this which had led her to take her present step. She might not realise all she might have to contend with, but her conservative and formal action had surrounded

her and her sister with a certain barrier of conventional protection, at once self-controlled, dignified, and astutely intelligent.

"Since, as you say, no structural changes are proposed, such as an owner might resent, and as Lady Anstruthers is the mother of the heir, and as Lady Anstruthers' father undertakes to defray all expenditure, no sane man could object to the restoration of the property. To do so would be to cause public opinion to express itself strongly against him. Such action would place him grossly in the wrong." Then he added with deliberation, realising that he was committing himself, and feeling firmly willing to do so for reasons of his own, "Sir Nigel is a man who objects strongly to putting himself--publicly--in the wrong."

"Thank you," said Miss Vanderpoel.

He had said this of intention for her enlightenment, and she was aware that he had done so.

"This will not be the first time that American fortunes have restored English estates," Mr. Townlinson continued amiably. "There have been many notable cases of late years. We shall be happy to place ourselves at your disposal at all times, Miss Vanderpoel. We are obliged to you for your consideration in the matter."

"Thank you," said Miss Vanderpoel again. "I wished to be sure that I should not be infringing any English rule I had no knowledge of."

"You will be infringing none. You have been most correct and courteous."

Before she went away Mr. Townlinson felt that he had been greatly enlightened as to what a young lady might know and be. She gave him singularly clear details as to what was proposed. There was so much to be done that he found himself opening his eyes slightly once or twice. But, of course, if Mr. Vanderpoel was prepared to spend money in a lavish manner, it was all to the good so far as the estate was concerned. They were stupendous, these people, and after all the heir was his grandson. And how striking it was that with all this power and readiness to use it, was evidently combined, even in this beautiful young person, the clearest business sense of the situation. What was done would be for the comfort of Lady Anstruthers and the future of her son. Sir Nigel, being unable to sell either house or lands, could not undo it.

When Mr. Townlinson accompanied his visitor to her carriage with dignified politeness he felt somewhat like an elderly solicitor who had found himself drawn into the atmosphere of a sort of intensely modern fairy tale. He saw two of his under clerks, with the impropriety of middle-class youth, looking out of an office window at the dark blue brougham and the tall young lady, whose beauty bloomed in the sunshine. He did not, on the whole, wonder at, though he deplored, the conduct of the young men. But they, of course, saw only what they colloquially described to each other as a "rippin' handsome girl." They knew nothing

of the interesting interview.

He himself returned to his private room in a musing mood and thought it all over, his mind dwelling on various features of the international situation, and more than once he said aloud:

"Most remarkable. Very remarkable, indeed."