CHAPTER XXI

KEDGERS

The work at Stornham Court went on steadily, though with no greater rapidity than is usually achieved by rural labourers. There was, however, without doubt, a certain stimulus in the occasional appearance of Miss Vanderpoel, who almost daily sauntered round the place to look on, and exchange a few words with the workmen. When they saw her coming, the men, hastily standing up to touch their foreheads, were conscious of a slight acceleration of being which was not quite the ordinary quickening produced by the presence of employers. It was, in fact, a sensation rather pleasing than anxious. Her interest in the work was, upon the whole, one which they found themselves beginning to share. The unusualness of the situation--a young woman, who evidently stood for many things and powers desirable, employing labourers and seeming to know what she intended them to do--was a thing not easy to get over, or be come accustomed to. But there she was, as easy and well mannered as you please--and with gentlefolks' ways, though, as an American, such finish could scarcely be expected from her. She knew each man's name, it was revealed gradually, and, what was more, knew what he stood for in the village, what cottage he lived in, how many children he had, and something about his wife. She remembered things and made inquiries which showed knowledge. Besides this, she represented, though perhaps they were scarcely yet fully awake to the fact, the promise their discouraged

dulness had long lost sight of.

It actually became apparent that her ladyship, who walked with her, was altering day by day. Was it true that the bit of colour they had heard spoken of when she returned from town was deepening and fixing itself on her cheek? It sometimes looked like it. Was she a bit less stiff and shy-like and frightened in her way? Buttle mentioned to his friends at The Clock that he was sure of it. She had begun to look a man in the face when she talked, and more than once he had heard her laugh at things her sister said.

To one man more than to any other had come an almost unspeakable piece of luck through the new arrival--a thing which to himself, at least, was as the opening of the heavens. This man was the discouraged Kedgers. Miss Vanderpoel, coming with her ladyship to talk to him, found that the man was a person of more experience than might have been imagined. In his youth he had been an under gardener at a great place, and being fond of his work, had learned more than under gardeners often learn. He had been one of a small army of workers under the orders of an imposing head gardener, whose knowledge was a science. He had seen and taken part in what was done in orchid houses, orangeries, vineries, peach houses, conservatories full of wondrous tropical plants. But it was not easy for a man like himself, uneducated and lacking confidence of character, to advance as a bolder young man might have done. The all-ruling head gardener had inspired him with awe. He had watched him reverently, accumulating knowledge, but being given, as an underling, no opportunity

to do more than obey orders. He had spent his life in obeying, and congratulated himself that obedience secured him his weekly wage.

"He was a great man--Mr. Timson--he was," he said, in talking to Miss Vanderpoel. "Ay, he was that. Knew everything that could happen to a flower or a s'rub or a vegetable. Knew it all. Had a lib'ery of books an' read 'em night an' day. Head gardener's cottage was good enough for gentry. The old Markis used to walk round the hothouses an' gardens talking to him by the hour. If you did what he told you EXACTLY like he told it to you, then you were all right, but if you didn't--well, you was off the place before you'd time to look round. Worked under him from twenty to forty. Then he died an' the new one that came in had new ways. He made a clean sweep of most of us. The men said he was jealous of Mr. Timson."

"That was bad for you, if you had a wife and children," Miss Vanderpoel said.

"Eight of us to feed," Kedgers answered. "A man with that on him can't wait, miss. I had to take the first place I could get. It wasn't a good one--poor parsonage with a big family an' not room on the place for the vegetables they wanted. Cabbages, an' potatoes, an' beans, an' broccoli. No time nor ground for flowers. Used to seem as if flowers got to be a kind of dream." Kedgers gave vent to a deprecatory half laugh. "Me--I was fond of flowers. I wouldn't have asked no better than to live among 'em. Mr. Timson gave me a book or two when his lordship sent him a

lot of new ones. I've bought a few myself--though I suppose I couldn't afford it."

From the poor parsonage he had gone to a market gardener, and had evidently liked the work better, hard and unceasing as it had been, because he had been among flowers again. Sudden changes from forcing houses to chill outside dampness had resulted in rheumatism. After that things had gone badly. He began to be regarded as past his prime of strength. Lower wages and labour still as hard as ever, though it professed to be lighter, and therefore cheaper. At last the big neglected gardens of Stornham.

"What I'm seeing, miss, all the time, is what could be done with 'em. Wonderful it'd be. They might be the show of the county-if we had Mr. Timson here."

Miss Vanderpoel, standing in the sunshine on the broad weed-grown pathway, was conscious that he was remotely moving. His flowers--his flowers. They had been the centre of his rudimentary rural being. Each man or woman cared for some one thing, and the unfed longing for it left the life of the creature a thwarted passion. Kedgers, yearning to stir the earth about the roots of blooming things, and doomed to broccoli and cabbage, had spent his years unfed. No thing is a small thing. Kedgers, with the earth under his broad finger nails, and his half apologetic laugh, being the centre of his own world, was as large as Mount Dunstan, who stood thwarted in the centre of his. Chancing-for God knows what

mystery of reason-to be born one of those having power, one might perhaps set in order a world like Kedgers'.

"In the course of twenty years' work under Timson," she said, "you must have learned a great deal from him."

"A good bit, miss-a good bit," admitted Kedgers. "If I hadn't ha' cared for the work, I might ha' gone on doing it with my eyes shut, but I didn't. Mr. Timson's heart was set on it as well as his head. An' mine got to be. But I wasn't even second or third under him--I was only one of a lot. He would have thought me fine an' impident if I'd told him I'd got to know a good deal of what he knew--and had some bits of ideas of my own."

"If you had men enough under you, and could order all you want," Miss Vanderpoel said tentatively, "you know what the place should be, no doubt."

"That I do, miss," answered Kedgers, turning red with feeling. "Why, if the soil was well treated, anything would grow here. There's situations for everything. There's shade for things that wants it, and south aspects for things that won't grow without the warmth of 'em. Well, I've gone about many a day when I was low down in my mind and worked myself up to being cheerful by just planning where I could put things and what they'd look like. Liliums, now, I could grow them in masses from June to October." He was becoming excited, like a war horse scenting battle from

afar, and forgot himself. "The Lilium Giganteum--I don't know whether you've ever seen one, miss--but if you did, it'd almost take your breath away. A Lilium that grows twelve feet high and more, and has a flower like a great snow-white trumpet, and the scent pouring out of it so that it floats for yards. There's a place where I could grow them so that you'd come on them sudden, and you'd think they couldn't be true."

"Grow them, Kedgers, begin to grow them," said Miss Vanderpoel. "I have never seen them--I must see them."

Kedgers' low, deprecatory chuckle made itself heard again,

"Perhaps I'm going too fast," he said. "It would take a good bit of expense to do it, miss. A good bit."

Then Miss Vanderpoel made--and she made it in the simplest matter-of-fact manner, too--the startling remark which, three hours later, all Stornham village had heard of. The most astounding part of the remark was that it was uttered as if there was nothing in it which was not the absolutely natural outcome of the circumstances of the case.

"Expense which is proper and necessary need not be considered," she said. "Regular accounts will be kept and supervised, but you can have all that is required."

Then it appeared that Kedgers almost became pale. Being a foreigner,

perhaps she did not know how much she was implying when she said such a
thing to a man who had never held a place like Timson's.

"Miss," he hesitated, even shamefacedly, because to suggest to such a fine-mannered, calm young lady that she might be ignorant, seemed perilously near impertinence. "Miss, did you mean you wanted only the Lilium Giganteum, or--or other things, as well."

"I should like to see," she answered him, "all that you see. I should like to hear more of it all, when we have time to talk it over. I understand we should need time to discuss plans."

The quiet way she went on! Seeming to believe in him, almost as if he was Mr. Timson. The old feeling, born and fostered by the great head gardener's rule, reasserted itself.

"It means more to work--and someone over them, miss," he said. "If--if you had a man like Mr. Timson----"

"You have not forgotten what you learned. With men enough under you it can be put into practice."

"You mean you'd trust me, miss--same as if I was Mr. Timson?"

"Yes. If you ever feel the need of a man like Timson, no doubt we can

find one. But you will not. You love the work too much."

Then still standing in the sunshine, on the weed-grown path, she continued to talk to him. It revealed itself that she understood a good deal. As he was to assume heavier responsibilities, he was to receive higher wages. It was his experience which was to be considered, not his years. This was a new point of view. The mere propeller of wheel-barrows and digger of the soil--particularly after having been attacked by rheumatism--depreciates in value after youth is past. Kedgers knew that a Mr. Timson, with a regiment of under gardeners, and daily increasing knowledge of his profession, could continue to direct, though years rolled by. But to such fortune he had not dared to aspire.

One of the lodges might be put in order for him to live in. He might have the hothouses to put in order, too; he might have implements, plants, shrubs, even some of the newer books to consult. Kedgers' brain reeled.

"You--think I am to be trusted, miss?" he said more than once. "You think it would be all right? I wasn't even second or third under Mr. Timson--but--if I say it as shouldn't--I never lost a chance of learning things. I was just mad about it. T'aint only Liliums--Lord, I know 'em all, as if they were my own children born an' bred--shrubs, coniferas, herbaceous borders that bloom in succession. My word! what you can do with just delphiniums an' campanula an' acquilegia an' poppies, everyday things like them, that'll grow in any cottage garden, an' bulbs

an' annuals! Roses, miss--why, Mr. Timson had them in thickets--an' carpets--an' clambering over trees and tumbling over walls in sheets an' torrents--just know their ways an' what they want, an' they'll grow in a riot. But they want feeding--feeding. A rose is a gross feeder. Feed a Glory deejon, and watch over him, an' he'll cover a housetop an' give you two bloomings."

"I have never lived in an English garden. I should like to see this one at its best."

Leaving her with salutes of abject gratitude, Kedgers moved away bewildered. What man could believe it true? At three or four yards' distance he stopped and, turning, came back to touch his cap again.

"You understand, miss," he said. "I wasn't even second or third under Mr. Timson. I'm not deceiving you, am I, miss?"

"You are to be trusted," said Miss Vanderpoel, "first because you love the things--and next because of Timson."