CHAPTER XXX

A RETURN

At the close of a long, warm afternoon Betty Vanderpoel came out upon the square stone terrace overlooking the gardens, and that part of the park which, enclosing them, caused them, as they melted into its greenness, to lose all limitations and appear to be only a more blooming bit of the landscape.

Upon the garden Betty's eyes dwelt, as she stood still for some minutes taking in their effect thoughtfully.

Kedgers had certainly accomplished much. His close-trimmed lawns did him credit, his flower beds were flushed and azured, purpled and snowed with bloom. Sweet tall spires, hung with blue or white or rosy flower bells, lifted their heads above the colour of lower growths. Only the fervent affection, the fasting and prayer of a Kedgers could have done such wonders with new things and old. The old ones he had cherished and allured into a renewal of existence--the new ones he had so coaxed out of their earthen pots into the soil, luxuriously prepared for their reception, and had afterwards so nourished and bedewed with soft waterings, so supported, watched over and adored that they had been almost unconscious of their transplanting. Without assistants he could have done nothing, but he had been given a sufficient number of under gardeners, and had even managed to inspire them with something of his

own ambition and solicitude. The result was before Betty's eyes in an aspect which, to such as knew the gardens well,--the Dunholms, for instance,--was astonishing in its success.

"I've had privileges, miss, and so have the flowers," Kedgers had said warmly, when Miss Vanderpoel had reported to him, for his encouragement, Dunholm Castle's praise. "Not one of 'em has ever had to wait for his food and drink, nor to complain of his bed not being what he was accustomed to. They've not had to wait for rain, for we've given it to 'em from watering cans, and, thank goodness, the season's been kind to 'em."

Betty, descending the terrace steps, wandered down the paths between the flower beds, glancing about her as she went. The air of neglect and desolation had been swept away. Buttle and Tim Soames had been given as many privileges as Kedgers. The chief points impressed upon them had been that the work must be done, not only thoroughly, but quickly. As many additional workmen as they required, as much solid material as they needed, but there must be a despatch which at first it staggered them to contemplate. They had not known such methods before. They had been accustomed to work under money limitation throughout their lives, and, when work must be done with insufficient aid, it must be done slowly. Economy had been the chief factor in all calculations, speed had not entered into them, so leisureliness had become a fixed habit. But it seemed American to sweep leisureliness away into space with a free gesture.

"It must be done QUICKLY," Miss Vanderpoel had said. "If ten men cannot do it quickly enough, you must have twenty--or as many more as are needed. It is time which must be saved just now."

Time more than money, it appeared. Buttle's experience had been that you might take time, if you did not charge for it. When time began to mean money, that was a different matter. If you did work by the job, you might drive in a few nails, loiter, and return without haste; if you worked by the hour, your absence would be inquired into. In the present case no one could loiter. That was realised early. The tall girl, with the deep straight look at you, made you realise that without spoken words. She expected energy something like her own. She was a new force and spurred them. No man knew how it was done, but, when she appeared among them--even in the afternoon--"lookin' that womany," holding up her thin dress over lace petticoats, the like of which had not been seen before, she looked on with just the same straight, expecting eyes. They did not seem to doubt in the least that she would find that great advance had been made.

So advance had been made, and work accomplished. As Betty walked from one place to another she saw the signs of it with gratification. The place was not the one she had come to a few months ago. Hothouses, outbuildings, stables were in repair. Work was still being done in different places. In the house itself carpenters or decorators were enclosed in some rooms, and at their business, but exterior order

prevailed. In the courtyard stablemen were at work, and her own groom came forward touching his forehead. She paid a visit to the horses. They were fine creatures, and, when she entered their stalls, made room for her and whinnied gently, in well-founded expectation of sugar and bread which were kept in a cupboard awaiting her visits. She smoothed velvet noses and patted satin sides, talking to Mason a little before she went her way.

Then she strolled into the park. The park was always a pleasure. She was in a thoughtful mood, and the soft green shadowed silence lured her. The summer wind hus-s-shed the branches as it lightly waved them, the brown earth of the avenue was sun-dappled, there were bird notes and calls to be heard here and there and everywhere, if one only arrested one's attention a moment to listen. And she was in a listening and dreaming mood--one of the moods in which bird, leaf, and wind, sun, shade, and scent of growing things have part.

And yet her thoughts were of mundane things.

It was on this avenue that G. Selden had met with his accident. He was still at Dunstan vicarage, and yesterday Mount Dunstan, in calling, had told them that Mr. Penzance was applying himself with delighted interest to a study of the manipulation of the Delkoff.

The thought of Mount Dunstan brought with it the thought of her father. This was because there was frequently in her mind a connection between

the two. How would the man of schemes, of wealth, and power almost unbounded, regard the man born with a load about his neck--chained to earth by it, standing in the midst of his hungering and thirsting possessions, his hands empty of what would feed them and restore their strength? Would he see any solution of the problem? She could imagine his looking at the situation through his gaze at the man, and considering both in his summing up.

"Circumstances and the man," she had heard him say. "But always the man first."

Being no visionary, he did not underestimate the power of circumstance. This Betty had learned from him. And what could practically be done with circumstance such as this? The question had begun to recur to her. What could she herself have done in the care of Rosy and Stornham, if chance had not placed in her hand the strongest lever? What she had accomplished had been easy--easy. All that had been required had been the qualities which control of the lever might itself tend to create in one. Given--by mere chance again--imagination and initiative, the moving of the lever did the rest. If chance had not been on one's side, what then? And where was this man's chance? She had said to Rosy, in speaking of the wealth of America, "Sometimes one is tired of it." And Rosy had reminded her that there were those who were not tired of it, who could bear some of the burden of it, if it might be laid on their own shoulders. The great beautiful, blind-faced house, awaiting its slow doom in the midst of its lonely unfed lands--what could save it, and all

it represented of race and name, and the stately history of men, but the power one professed to call base and sordid--mere money? She felt a sudden impatience at herself for having said she was tired of it. That was a folly which took upon itself the aspect of an affectation.

And, if a man could not earn money--or go forth to rob richer neighbours of it as in the good old marauding days--or accept it if it were offered to him as a gift--what could he do? Nothing. If he had been born a village labourer, he could have earned by the work of his hands enough to keep his cottage roof over him, and have held up his head among his fellows. But for such as himself there was no mere labour which would avail. He had not that rough honest resource. Only the decent living and orderly management of the generations behind him would have left to him fairly his own chance to hold with dignity the place in the world into which Fate had thrust him at the outset--a blind, newborn thing of whom no permission had been asked.

"If I broke stones upon the highway for twelve hours a day, I might earn two shillings," he had said to Betty, on the previous day. "I could break stones well," holding out a big arm, "but fourteen shillings a week will do no more than buy bread and bacon for a stonebreaker."

He was ordinarily rather silent and stiff in his conversational attitude towards his own affairs. Betty sometimes wondered how she herself knew so much about them--how it happened that her thoughts so often dwelt upon them. The explanation she had once made to herself had been half

irony, half serious reflection.

"It is a result of the first Reuben Vanderpoel. It is because I am of the fighting commercial stock, and, when I see a business problem, I cannot leave it alone, even when it is no affair of mine."

As an exposition of the type of the commercial fighting-stock she presented, as she paused beneath overshadowing trees, an aspect beautifully suggesting a far different thing.

She stood--all white from slim shoe to tilted parasol,--and either the result of her inspection of the work done by her order, or a combination of her summer-day mood with her feeling for the problem, had given her a special radiance. It glowed on lip and cheek, and shone in her Irish eyes.

She had paused to look at a man approaching down the avenue. He was not a labourer, and she did not know him. Men who were not labourers usually rode or drove, and this one was walking. He was neither young nor old, and, though at a distance his aspect was not attracting, she found that she regarded him curiously, and waited for him to draw nearer.

The man himself was glancing about him with a puzzled look and knitted forehead. When he had passed through the village he had seen things he had not expected to see; when he had reached the entrance gate, and--for reasons of his own--dismissed his station trap, he had looked at the

lodge scrutinisingly, because he was not prepared for its picturesque trimness. The avenue was free from weeds and in order, the two gates beyond him were new and substantial. As he went on his way and reached the first, he saw at about a hundred yards distance a tall girl in white standing watching him. Things which were not easily explainable always irritated him. That this place--which was his own affair--should present an air of mystery, did not improve his humour, which was bad to begin with. He had lately been passing through unpleasant things, which had left him feeling himself tricked and made ridiculous--as only women can trick a man and make him ridiculous, he had said to himself. And there had been an acrid consolation in looking forward to the relief of venting one's self on a woman who dare not resent.

"What has happened, confound it!" he muttered, when he caught sight of the girl. "Have we set up a house party?" And then, as he saw more distinctly, "Damn! What a figure!"

By this time Betty herself had begun to see more clearly. Surely this was a face she remembered--though the passing of years and ugly living had thickened and blurred, somewhat, its always heavy features. Suddenly she knew it, and the look in its eyes--the look she had, as a child, unreasoningly hated.

Nigel Anstruthers had returned from his private holiday.

As she took a few quiet steps forward to meet him, their eyes rested on

each other. After a night or two in town his were slightly bloodshot, and the light in them was not agreeable.

It was he who spoke first, and it is possible that he did not quite intend to use the expletive which broke from him. But he was remembering things also. Here were eyes he, too, had seen before--twelve years ago in the face of an objectionable, long-legged child in New York. And his own hatred of them had been founded in his own opinion on the best of reasons. And here they gazed at him from the face of a young beauty--for a beauty she was.

"Damn it!" he exclaimed; "it is Betty."

"Yes," she answered, with a faint, but entirely courteous, smile. "It is. I hope you are very well."

She held out her hand. "A delicious hand," was what he said to himself, as he took it. And what eyes for a girl to have in her head were those which looked out at him between shadows. Was there a hint of the devil in them? He thought so--he hoped so, since she had descended on the place in this way. But WHAT the devil was the meaning of her being on the spot at all? He was, however, far beyond the lack of astuteness which might have permitted him to express this last thought at this particular juncture. He was only betrayed into stupid mistakes, afterwards to be regretted, when rage caused him utterly to lose control of his wits. And, though he was startled and not exactly pleased, he was

not in a rage now. The eyelashes and the figure gave an agreeable fillip to his humour. Howsoever she had come, she was worth looking at.

"How could one expect such a delightful thing as this?" he said, with a touch of ironic amiability. "It is more than one deserves."

"It is very polite of you to say that," answered Betty.

He was thinking rapidly as he stood and gazed at her. There were, in truth, many things to think of under circumstances so unexpected.

"May I ask you to excuse my staring at you?" he inquired with what Rosy had called his "awful, agreeable smile." "When I saw you last you were a fierce nine-year-old American child. I use the word 'fierce' because--if you'll pardon my saying so--there was a certain ferocity about you."

"I have learned at various educational institutions to conceal it," smiled Betty.

"May I ask when you arrived?"

"A short time after you went abroad."

"Rosalie did not inform me of your arrival."

"She did not know your address. You had forgotten to leave it."

He had made a mistake and realised it. But she presented to him no air of having observed his slip. He paused a few seconds, still regarding her and still thinking rapidly. He recalled the mended windows and roofs and palings in the village, the park gates and entrance. Who the devil had done all that? How could a mere handsome girl be concerned in it? And yet--here she was.

"When I drove through the village," he said next, "I saw that some remarkable changes had taken place on my property. I feel as if you can explain them to me."

"I hope they are changes which meet with your approval."

"Quite--quite," a little curtly. "Though I confess they mystify me. Though I am the son-in-law of an American multimillionaire, I could not afford to make such repairs myself."

A certain small spitefulness which was his most frequent undoing made it impossible for him to resist adding the innuendo in his last sentence. And again he saw it was a folly. The impersonal tone of her reply simply left him where he had placed himself.

"We were sorry not to be able to reach you. As it seemed well to begin the work at once, we consulted Messrs. Townlinson & Sheppard."

"We?" he repeated. "Am I to have the pleasure," with a slight wryness of the mouth, "of finding Mr. Vanderpoel also at Stornham?"

"No--not yet. As I was on the spot, I saw your solicitors and asked their advice and approval--for my father. If he had known how necessary the work was, it would have been done before, for Ughtred's sake."

Her voice was that of a person who, in stating obvious facts, provides no approach to enlightening comment upon them. And there was in her manner the merest gracious impersonality.

"Do I understand that Mr. Vanderpoel employed someone to visit the place and direct the work?"

"It was really not difficult to direct. It was merely a matter of engaging labour and competent foremen."

An odd expression rose in his eyes.

"You suggest a novel idea, upon my word," he said. "Is it possible--you see I know something of America--is it possible I must thank YOU for the working of this magic?"

"You need not thank me," she said, rather slowly, because it was necessary that she also should think of many things at once. "I could

not have helped doing it."

She wished to make all clear to him before he met Rosy. She knew it was not unnatural that the unexpectedness of his appearance might deprive Lady Anstruthers of presence of mind. Instinct told her that what was needed in intercourse with him was, above all things, presence of mind.

"I will tell you about it," she said. "We will walk slowly up and down here, if you do not object."

He did not object. He wanted to hear the story as he could not hear it from his nervous little fool of a wife, who would be frightened into forgetting things and their sequence. What he meant to discover was where he stood in the matter--where his father-in-law stood, and, rather specially, to have a chance to sum up the weaknesses and strengths of the new arrival. That would be to his interest. In talking this thing over she would unconsciously reveal how much vanity or emotion or inexperience he might count upon as factors safe to use in one's dealings with her in the future.

As he listened he was supported by the fact that he did not lose consciousness of the eyes and the figure. But for these it is probable that he would have gone blind with fury at certain points which forced themselves upon him. The first was that there had been an absurd and immense expenditure which would simply benefit his son and not himself. He could not sell or borrow money on what had been given. Apparently

the place had been re-established on a footing such as it had not rested upon during his own generation, or his father's. As he loathed life in the country, it was not he who would enjoy its luxury, but his wife and her child. The second point was that these people--this girl--had somehow had the sharpness to put themselves in the right, and to place him in a position at which he could not complain without putting himself in the wrong. Public opinion would say that benefits had been heaped upon him, that the correct thing had been done correctly with the knowledge and approval of the legal advisers of his family. It had been a masterly thing, that visit to Townlinson & Sheppard. He was obliged to aid his self-control by a glance at the eyelashes. She was a new sort of girl, this Betty, whose childhood he had loathed, and, to his jaded taste, novelty appealed enormously. Her attraction for him was also added to by the fact that he was not at all sure that there was not combined with it a pungent spice of the old detestation. He was repelled as well as allured. She represented things which he hated. First, the mere material power, which no man can bully, whatsoever his humour. It was the power he most longed for and, as he could not hope to possess it, most sneered at and raged against. Also, as she talked, it was plain that her habit of self-control and her sense of resource would be difficult to deal with. He was a survival of the type of man whose simple creed was that women should not possess resources, as when they possessed them they could rarely be made to behave themselves.

But while he thought these things, he walked by her side and both listened and talked smiling the agreeable smile.

"You will pardon my dull bewilderment," he said. "It is not unnatural, is it--in a mere outsider?"

And Betty, with the beautiful impersonal smile, said:

"We felt it so unfortunate that even your solicitors did not know your address."

When, at length, they turned and strolled towards the house, a carriage was drawing up before the door, and at the sight of it, Betty saw her companion slightly lift his eyebrows. Lady Anstruthers had been out and was returning. The groom got down from the box, and two men-servants appeared upon the steps. Lady Anstruthers descended, laughing a little as she talked to Ughtred, who had been with her. She was dressed in clear, pale grey, and the soft rose lining of her parasol warmed the colour of her skin.

Sir Nigel paused a second and put up his glass.

"Is that my wife?" he said. "Really! She quite recalls New York."

The agreeable smile was on his lips as he hastened forward. He always more or less enjoyed coming upon Rosalie suddenly. The obvious result was a pleasing tribute to his power.

Betty, following him, saw what occurred.

Ughtred saw him first, and spoke quick and low.

"Mother!" he said.

The tone of his voice was evidently enough. Lady Anstruthers turned with an unmistakable start. The rose lining of her parasol ceased to warm her colour. In fact, the parasol itself stepped aside, and she stood with a blank, stiff, white face.

"My dear Rosalie," said Sir Nigel, going towards her. "You don't look very glad to see me."

He bent and kissed her quite with the air of a devoted husband. Knowing what the caress meant, and seeing Rosy's face as she submitted to it, Betty felt rather cold. After the conjugal greeting he turned to Ughtred.

"You look remarkably well," he said.

Betty came forward.

"We met in the park, Rosy," she explained. "We have been talking to each other for half an hour."

The atmosphere which had surrounded her during the last three months had done much for Lady Anstruthers' nerves. She had the power to recover herself. Sir Nigel himself saw this when she spoke.

"I was startled because I was not expecting to see you," she said. "I thought you were still on the Riviera. I hope you had a pleasant journey home."

"I had an extraordinarily pleasant surprise in finding your sister here," he answered. And they went into the house.

In descending the staircase on his way to the drawing-room before dinner, Sir Nigel glanced about him with interested curiosity. If the village had been put in order, something more had been done here. Remembering the worn rugs and the bald-headed tiger, he lifted his brows. To leave one's house in a state of resigned dilapidation and return to find it filled with all such things as comfort combined with excellent taste might demand, was an enlivening experience--or would have been so under some circumstances. As matters stood, perhaps, he might have felt better pleased if things had been less well done. But they were very well done. They had managed to put themselves in the right in this also. The rich sobriety of colour and form left no opening for supercilious comment--which was a neat weapon it was annoying to be robbed of.

The drawing-room was fresh, brightly charming, and full of flowers. Betty was standing before an open window with her sister. His wife's shoulders, he observed at once, had absolutely begun to suggest contours. At all events, her bones no longer stuck out. But one did not look at one's wife's shoulders when one could turn from them to a fairness of velvet and ivory. "You know," he said, approaching them, "I find all this very amazing. I have been looking out of my window on to the gardens."

"It is Betty who has done it all," said Rosy.

"I did not suspect you of doing it, my dear Rosalie," smiling. "When I saw Betty standing in the avenue, I knew at once that it was she who had mended the chimney-pots in the village and rehung the gates."

For the present, at least, it was evident that he meant to be sufficiently amiable. At the dinner table he was conversational and asked many questions, professing a natural interest in what had been done. It was not difficult to talk to a girl whose eyes and shoulders combined themselves with a quick wit and a power to attract which he reluctantly owned he had never seen equalled. His reluctance arose from the fact that such a power complicated matters. He must be on the defensive until he knew what she was going to do, what he must do himself, and what results were probable or possible. He had spent his life in intrigue of one order or another. He enjoyed outwitting people and rather preferred to attain an end by devious paths. He began every

acquaintance on the defensive. His argument was that you never knew how things would turn out, consequently, it was as well to conduct one's self at the outset with the discreet forethought of a man in the presence of an enemy. He did not know how things would turn out in Betty's case, and it was a little confusing to find one's self watching her with a sense of excitement. He would have preferred to be cool--to be cold--and he realised that he could not keep his eyes off her.

"I remember, with regret," he said to her later in the evening, "that when you were a child we were enemies."

"I am afraid we were," was Betty's impartial answer.

"I am sure it was my fault," he said. "Pray forget it. Since you have accomplished such wonders, will you not, in the morning, take me about the place and explain to me how it has been done?"

When Betty went to her room she dismissed her maid as soon as possible, and sat for some time alone and waiting. She had had no opportunity to speak to Rosy in private, and she was sure she would come to her. In the course of half an hour she heard a knock at the door.

Yes, it was Rosy, and her newly-born colour had fled and left her looking dragged again. She came forward and dropped into a low chair near Betty, letting her face fall into her hands.

"I'm very sorry, Betty," she half whispered, "but it is no use."

"What is no use?" Betty asked.

"Nothing is any use. All these years have made me such a coward. I suppose I always was a coward, but in the old days there never was anything to be afraid of."

"What are you most afraid of now?"

"I don't know. That is the worst. I am afraid of HIM--just of himself--of the look in his eyes--of what he may be planning quietly. My strength dies away when he comes near me."

"What has he said to you?" she asked.

"He came into my dressing-room and sat and talked. He looked about from one thing to another and pretended to admire it all and congratulated me. But though he did not sneer at what he saw, his eyes were sneering at me. He talked about you. He said that you were a very clever woman. I don't know how he manages to imply that a very clever woman is something cunning and debased--but it means that when he says it. It seems to insinuate things which make one grow hot all over."

She put out a hand and caught one of Betty's.

"Betty, Betty," she implored. "Don't make him angry. Don't."

"I am not going to begin by making him angry," Betty said. "And I do not think he will try to make me angry--at first."

"No, he will not," cried Rosalie. "And--and you remember what I told you when first we talked about him?"

"And do you remember," was Betty's answer, "what I said to you when I first met you in the park? If we were to cable to New York this moment, we could receive an answer in a few hours."

"He would not let us do it," said Rosy. "He would stop us in some way--as he stopped my letters to mother--as he stopped me when I tried to run away. Oh, Betty, I know him and you do not."

"I shall know him better every day. That is what I must do. I must learn to know him. He said something more to you than you have told me, Rosy. What was it?"

"He waited until Detcham left me," Lady Anstruthers confessed, more than half reluctantly. "And then he got up to go away, and stood with his hands resting on the chairback, and spoke to me in a low, queer voice. He said, 'Don't try to play any tricks on me, my good girl--and don't let your sister try to play any. You would both have reason to regret it.'"

She was a half-hypnotised thing, and Betty, watching her with curious but tender eyes, recognised the abnormality.

"Ah, if I am a clever woman," she said, "he is a clever man. He is beginning to see that his power is slipping away. That was what G. Selden would call 'bluff.'"