Chapter Five

After she had taken her early tea in the morning, Emily Fox-Seton lay upon her pillows and gazed out upon the tree-branches near her window, in a state of bliss. She was tired, but happy. How well everything had "gone off"! How pleased Lady Maria had been, and how kind of Lord Walderhurst to ask the villagers to give three cheers for herself! She had never dreamed of such a thing. It was the kind of attention not usually offered to her. She smiled her childlike smile and blushed at the memory of it. Her impression of the world was that people were really very amiable, as a rule. They were always good to her, at least, she thought, and it did not occur to her that if she had not paid her way so remarkably well by being useful they might have been less agreeable. Never once had she doubted that Lady Maria was the most admirable and generous of human beings. She was not aware in the least that her ladyship got a good deal out of her. In justice to her ladyship, it may be said that she was not wholly aware of it herself, and that Emily absolutely enjoyed being made use of.

This morning, however, when she got up, she found herself more tired than she ever remembered being before, and it may be easily argued that a woman who runs about London on other people's errands often knows what
it is to be aware of aching limbs. She laughed a little when she discovered that her feet were actually rather swollen, and that she must

wear a pair of her easiest slippers. "I must sit down as much as I can to-day," she thought. "And yet, with the dinner-party and the excursion this morning, there may be a number of little things Lady Maria would like me to do."

There were, indeed, numbers of things Lady Maria was extremely glad to ask her to do. The drive to the ruins was to be made before lunch, because some of the guests felt that an afternoon jaunt would leave them rather fagged for the dinner-party in the evening. Lady Maria was not going, and, as presently became apparent, the carriages would be rather crowded if Miss Fox-Seton joined the party. On the whole, Emily was not sorry to have an excuse for remaining at home, and so the carriages drove away comfortably filled, and Lady Maria and Miss Fox-Seton watched their departure.

"I have no intention of having my venerable bones rattled over hill and dale the day I give a dinner-party," said her ladyship. "Please ring the bell, Emily. I want to make sure of the fish. Fish is one of the problems of country life. Fishmongers are demons, and when they live five miles from one they can arouse the most powerful human emotions."

Mallowe Court was at a distance from the country town delightful in its effects upon the rusticity of the neighbourhood, but appalling when considered in connection with fish. One could not dine Without fish; the town was small and barren of resources, and the one fishmonger of weak mind and unreliable nature.

The footman who obeyed the summons of the bell informed her ladyship that the cook was rather anxious about the fish, as usual. The fishmonger had been a little doubtful as to whether he could supply her needs, and his cart never arrived until half-past twelve.

"Great goodness!" exclaimed her ladyship when the man retired. "What a situation if we found ourselves without fish! Old General Barnes is the most ferocious old gourmand in England, and he loathes people who give him bad dinners. We are all rather afraid of him, the fact is, and I will own that I am vain about my dinners. That is the last charm nature leaves a woman, the power to give decent dinners. I shall be fearfully annoyed if any ridiculous thing happens."

They sat in the morning-room together writing notes and talking, and as half-past twelve drew near, watching for the fishmonger's cart. Once or twice Lady Maria spoke of Lord Walderhurst.

"He is an interesting creature, to my mind," she said. "I have always rather liked him. He has original ideas, though he is not in the least brilliant. I believe he talks more freely to me, on the whole, than to most people, though I can't say he has a particularly good opinion of me. He stuck his glass in his eye and stared at me last night, in that weird way of his, and said to me, 'Maria, in an ingenuous fashion of your own, you are the most abominably selfish woman I ever beheld.' Still, I know he rather likes me. I said to him: 'That isn't quite true,

James. I am selfish, but I'm not abominably selfish. Abominably selfish people always have nasty tempers, and no one can accuse me of having a nasty temper. I have the disposition of a bowl of bread and milk."

"Emily,"--as wheels rattled up the avenue,--"is that the fishmonger's cart?"

"No," answered Emily at the window; "it is the butcher."

"His attitude toward the women here has made my joy," Lady Maria proceeded, smiling over the deep-sea fishermen's knitted helmet she had taken up. "He behaves beautifully to them all, but not one of them has really a leg to stand on as far as he is responsible for it. But I will tell you something, Emily." She paused.

Miss Fox-Seton waited with interested eyes.

"He is thinking of bringing the thing to an end and marrying some woman. I feel it in my bones."

"Do you think so?" exclaimed Emily. "Oh, I can't help hoping--" But she paused also.

"You hope it will be Agatha Slade," Lady Maria ended for her. "Well, perhaps it will be. I sometimes think it is Agatha, if it's any one. And

yet I'm not sure. One never could be sure with Walderhurst. He has always had a trick of keeping more than his mouth shut. I wonder if he could have any other woman up his sleeve?"

"Why do you think--" began Emily.

Lady Maria laughed.

"For an odd reason. The Walderhursts have a ridiculously splendid ring in the family, which they have a way of giving to the women they become engaged to. It's ridiculous because--well, because a ruby as big as a trouser's button is ridiculous. You can't get over that. There is a story connected with this one--centuries and things, and something about the woman the first Walderhurst had it made for. She was a Dame Something or Other who had snubbed the King for being forward, and the snubbing was so good for him that he thought she was a saint and gave the ruby for her betrothal. Well, by the merest accident I found Walderhurst had sent his man to town for it. It came two days ago."

"Oh, how interesting!" said Emily, thrilled. "It must mean something."

"It is rather a joke. Wheels again, Emily. Is that the fishmonger?"

Emily went to the window once more. "Yes," she answered, "if his name is Buggle."

"His name is Buggle," said Lady Maria, "and we are saved."

But five minutes later the cook herself appeared at the morning-room door. She was a stout person, who panted, and respectfully removed beads of perspiration from her brow with a clean handkerchief.

She was as nearly pale as a heated person of her weight may be.

"And what has happened now, cook?" asked Lady Maria.

"That Buggle, your ladyship," said cook, "says your ladyship can't be no sorrier than he is, but when fish goes bad in a night it can't be made fresh in the morning. He brought it that I might see it for myself, and it is in a state as could not be used by any one. I was that upset, your ladyship, that I felt like I must come and explain myself."

"What can be done?" exclaimed Lady Maria. "Emily, do suggest something."

"We can't even be sure," said the cook, "that Batch has what would suit us. Batch sometimes has it, but he is the fishmonger at Maundell, and that is four miles away, and we are short-'anded, your ladyship, now the 'ouse is so full, and not a servant that could be spared."

"Dear me!" said Lady Maria. "Emily, this is really enough to drive one quite mad. If everything was not out of the stables, I know you would

drive over to Maundell. You are such a good walker,"--catching a gleam of hope,--"do you think you could walk?"

Emily tried to look cheerful. Lady Maria's situation was really an awful one for a hostess. It would not have mattered in the least if her strong, healthy body had not been so tired. She was an excellent walker, and ordinarily eight miles would have meant nothing in the way of fatigue. She was kept in good training by her walking in town, Springy moorland swept by fresh breezes was not like London streets.

"I think I can manage it," she said nice-temperedly. "If I had not run about so much yesterday it would be a mere nothing. You must have the fish, of course. I will walk over the moor to Maundell and tell Batch it must be sent at once. Then I will come back slowly. I can rest on the heather by the way. The moor is lovely in the afternoon."

"You dear soul!" Lady Maria broke forth. "What a boon you are to a woman!"

She felt quite grateful. There arose in her mind an impulse to invite Emily Fox-Seton to remain the rest of her life with her, but she was too experienced an elderly lady to give way to impulses. She privately resolved, however, that she would have her a good deal in South Audley Street, and would make her some decent presents.

When Emily Fox-Seton, attired for her walk in her shortest brown linen

frock and shadiest hat, passed through the hall, the post-boy was just delivering the midday letters to a footman. The servant presented his salver to her with a letter for herself lying upon the top of one addressed in Lady Claraway's handwriting "To the Lady Agatha Slade." Emily recognised it as one of the epistles of many sheets which so often made poor Agatha shed slow and depressed tears. Her own letter was directed in the well-known hand of Mrs. Cupp, and she wondered what it could contain.

"I hope the poor things are not in any trouble," she thought. "They were afraid the young man in the sitting-room was engaged. If he got married and left them, I don't know what they would do; he has been so regular."

Though the day was hot, the weather was perfect, and Emily, having exchanged her easy slippers for an almost equally easy pair of tan shoes, found her tired feet might still be used. Her disposition to make the very best of things inspired her to regard even an eight-mile walk with courage. The moorland air was so sweet, the sound of the bees droning as they stumbled about in the heather was such a comfortable, peaceful thing, that she convinced herself that she should find the four miles to Maundell quite agreeable.

She had so many nice things to think of that she temporarily forgot that she had put Mrs. Cupp's letter in her pocket, and was half-way across the moor before she remembered it.

"Dear me!" she exclaimed when she recalled it. "I must see what has happened."

She opened the envelope and began to read as she walked; but she had not taken many steps before she uttered an exclamation and stopped.

"How very nice for them!" she said, but she turned rather pale.

From a worldly point of view the news the letter contained was indeed very nice for the Cupps, but it put a painful aspect upon the simple affairs of poor Miss Fox-Seton.

"It is a great piece of news, in one way," wrote Mrs. Cupp, "and yet me and Jane can't help feeling a bit low at the thought of the changes it will make, and us living where you won't be with us, if I may take the liberty, miss. My brother William made a good bit of money in Australia, but he has always been homesick for the old country, as he always calls England. His wife was a Colonial, and when she died a year ago he made up his mind to come home to settle in Chichester, where he was born. He says there's nothing like the feeling of a Cathedral town. He's bought such a nice house a bit out, with a big garden, and he wants me and Jane to come and make a home with him. He says he has worked hard all his life, and now he means to be comfortable, and he can't be bothered with housekeeping. He promises to provide well for us both, and he wants us to sell up Mortimer Street, and come as quick as possible. But we shall miss you, miss, and though her Uncle William keeps a trap and

everything according, and Jane is grateful for his kindness, she broke down and cried hard last night, and says to me: 'Oh, mother, if Miss Fox-Seton could just manage to take me as a maid, I would rather be it than anything. Traps don't feed the heart, mother, and I've a feeling for Miss Fox-Seton as is perhaps unbecoming to my station.' But we've got the men in the house ticketing things, miss, and we want to know what we shall do with the articles in your bed-sitting-room."

The friendliness of the two faithful Cupps and the humble Turkey-red comforts of the bed-sitting-room had meant home to Emily Fox-Seton. When she had turned her face and her tired feet away from discouraging errands and small humiliations and discomforts, she had turned them toward the bed-sitting-room, the hot little fire, the small, fat black kettle singing on the hob, and the two-and-eleven-penny tea-set. Not being given to crossing bridges before she reached them, she had never contemplated the dreary possibility that her refuge might be taken away from her. She had not dwelt upon the fact that she had no other real refuge on earth.

As she walked among the sun-heated heather and the luxuriously droning bees, she dwelt upon it now with a suddenly realising sense. As it came home to her soul, her eyes filled with big tears, which brimmed over and rolled down her cheeks. They dropped upon the breast of her linen blouse and left marks.

"I shall have to find a new bed-sitting-room somewhere," she said, the

breast of the linen blouse lifting itself sharply. "It will be so different to be in a house with strangers. Mrs. Cupp and Jane--" She was obliged to take out her handkerchief at that moment. "I am afraid I can't get anything respectable for ten shillings a week. It Was very cheap--and they were so nice!"

All her fatigue of the early morning had returned. Her feet began to burn and ache, and the sun felt almost unbearably hot. The mist in her eyes prevented her seeing the path before her. Once or twice she stumbled over something.

"It seems as if it must be farther than four miles," she said. "And then there is the walk back. I am tired. But I must get on, really."