

Chapter Six

The drive to the ruins had been a great success. It was a drive of just sufficient length to put people in spirits without fatiguing them. The party came back to lunch with delightful appetities. Lady Agatha and Miss Cora Brooke had pink cheeks. The Marquis of Walderhurst had behaved charmingly to both of them. He had helped each of them to climb about among the ruins, and had taken them both up the steep, dark stairway of one of the towers, and stood with them looking over the turrets into the courtyard and the moat. He knew the history of the castle and could point out the banquet-hall and the chapel and the serving-places, and knew legends about the dungeons.

"He gives us all a turn, mother," said Miss Cora Brooke. "He even gave a turn yesterday to poor Emily Fox-Seton. He's rather nice."

There was a great deal of laughter at lunch after their return. Miss Cora Brooke was quite brilliant in her gay little sallies. But though she was more talkative than Lady Agatha, she did not look more brilliant.

The letter from Curzon Street had not made the beauty shed tears. Her face had fallen when it had been handed to her on her return, and she had taken it upstairs to her room with rather a flagging step. But when

she came down to lunch she walked with the movement of a nymph. Her lovely little face wore a sort of tremulous radiance. She laughed like a child at every amusing thing that was said. She might have been ten years old instead of twenty-two, her colour, her eyes, her spirits seemed of a freshness so infantine.

She was leaning back in her chair laughing enchantingly at one of Miss Brooke's sparkling remarks when Lord Walderhurst, who sat next to her, said suddenly, glancing round the table:

"But where is Miss Fox-Seton?"

It was perhaps a significant fact that up to this moment nobody had observed her absence. It was Lady Maria who replied.

"I am almost ashamed to answer," she said. "As I have said before, Emily Fox-Seton has become the lodestar of my existence. I cannot live without her. She has walked over to Maundell to make sure that we do not have a dinner-party without fish to-night."

"She has walked over to Maundell," said Lord Walderhurst--"after yesterday?"

"There was not a pair of wheels left in the stable," answered Lady Maria. "It is disgraceful, of course, but she is a splendid walker, and she said she was not too tired to do it. It is the kind of thing she

ought to be given the Victoria Cross for--saving one from a dinner-party without fish."

The Marquis of Walderhurst took up the cord of his monocle and fixed the glass rigidly in his eye.

"It is not only four miles to Maundell," he remarked, staring at the table-cloth, not at Lady Maria, "but it is four miles back."

"By a singular coincidence," said Lady Maria.

The talk and laughter went on, and the lunch also, but Lord Walderhurst, for some reason best known to himself, did not finish his. For a few seconds he stared at the table-cloth, then he pushed aside his nearly disposed-of cutlet, then he got up from his chair quietly.

"Excuse me, Maria," he said, and without further ado went out of the room, and walked toward the stables.

There was excellent fish at Maundell; Batch produced it at once, fresh, sound, and desirable. Had she been in her normal spirits, Emily would have rejoiced at the sight of it, and have retraced her four miles to Mallowe in absolute jubilation. She would have shortened and beguiled her return journey by depicting to herself Lady Maria's pleasure and relief.

But the letter from Mrs. Cupp lay like a weight of lead in her pocket. It had given her such things to think of as she walked that she had been oblivious to heather and bees and fleece-bedecked summer-blue sky, and had felt more tired than in any tramp through London streets that she could call to mind. Each step she took seemed to be carrying her farther away from the few square yards of home the bed-sitting-room had represented under the dominion of the Cupps. Every moment she recalled more strongly that it had been home--home. Of course it had not been the third-floor back room so much as it had been the Cupps who made it so, who had regarded her as a sort of possession, who had liked to serve her, and had done it with actual affection.

"I shall have to find a new place," she kept saying. "I shall have to go among quite strange people."

She had suddenly a new sense of being without resource. That was one of the proofs of the curious heaviness of the blow the simple occurrence was to her. She felt temporarily almost as if there were no other lodging-houses in London, though she knew that really there were tens of thousands. The fact was that though there might be other Cupps, or their counterparts, she could not make herself believe such a good thing possible. She had been physically worn out before she had read the letter, and its effect had been proportionate to her fatigue and lack of power to rebound. She was vaguely surprised to feel that the tears kept filling her eyes and falling on her cheeks in big heavy drops. She was

obliged to use her handkerchief frequently, as if she was suddenly developing a cold in her head.

"I must take care," she said once, quite prosaically, but with more pathos in her voice than she was aware of, "or I shall make my nose quite red."

Though Batch was able to supply fish, he was unfortunately not able to send it to Mallowe. His cart had gone out on a round just before Miss Fox-Seton's arrival, and there was no knowing when it would return.

"Then I must carry the fish myself," said Emily. "You can put it in a neat basket."

"I'm very sorry, miss; I am, indeed, miss," said Batch, looking hot and pained.

"It will not be heavy," returned Emily; "and her ladyship must be sure of it for the dinner-party."

So she turned back to recross the moor with a basket of fish on her arm. And she was so pathetically unhappy that she felt that so long as she lived the odour of fresh fish would make her feel sorrowful. She had heard of people who were made sorrowful by the odour of a flower or the sound of a melody but in her case it would be the smell of fresh fish that would make her sad. If she had been a person with a sense of

humour, she might have seen that this was thing to laugh at a little.

But she was not a humorous woman, and just now----

"Oh, I shall have to find a new place," she was thinking, "and I have lived in that little room for years."

The sun got hotter and hotter, and her feet became so tired that she could scarcely drag one of them after another. She had forgotten that she had left Mallowe before lunch, and that she ought to have got a cup of tea, at least, at Maundell. Before she had walked a mile on her way back, she realised that she was frightfully hungry and rather faint.

"There is not even a cottage where I could get a glass of water," she thought.

The basket, which was really comparatively light, began to feel heavy on her arm, and at length she felt sure that a certain burning spot on her left heel must be a blister which was being rubbed by her shoe. How it hurt her, and how tired she was--how tired! And when she left Mallowe--lovely, luxurious Mallowe--she would not go back to her little room all fresh from the Cupps' autumn house-cleaning, which included the washing and ironing of her Turkey-red hangings and chair-covers; she would be obliged to huddle into any poor place she could find. And Mrs. Cupp and Jane would be in Chichester.

"But what good fortune it is for them!" she murmured. "They need never

be anxious about the future again. How--how wonderful it must be to know that one need not be afraid of the future! I--indeed, I think I really must sit down."

She sat down upon the sun-warmed heather and actually let her tear-wet face drop upon her hands.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" she said helplessly. "I must not let myself do this. I mustn't, Oh, dear! Oh, dear! Oh, dear!"

She was so overpowered by her sense of her own weakness that she was conscious of nothing but the fact that she must control it. Upon the elastic moorland road wheels stole upon one without sound. So the wheels of a rapidly driven high cart approached her and were almost at her side before she lifted her head, startled by a sudden consciousness that a vehicle was near her.

It was Lord Walderhurst's cart, and even as she gazed at him with alarmed wet eyes, his lordship descended from it and made a sign to his groom, who at once impassively drove on.

Emily's lips tried to tremble into a smile; she put out her hand fumblingly toward the fish-basket, and having secured it, began to rise.

"I--sat down to rest," she faltered, even apologetically. "I walked to Maundell, and it was so hot."

Just at that moment a little breeze sprang up and swept across her cheek. She was so grateful that her smile became less difficult.

"I got what Lady Maria wanted," she added, and the childlike dimple in her cheek endeavoured to defy her eyes.

The Marquis of Walderhurst looked rather odd. Emily had never seen him look like this before. He took a silver flask out of his pocket in a matter-of-fact way, and filled its cup with something.

"That is sherry," he said. "Please drink it. You are absolutely faint."

She held out her hand eagerly. She could not help it.

"Oh, thank you--thank you!" she said. "I am so thirsty!" And she drank it as if it were the nectar of the gods.

"Now, Miss Fox-Seton," he said, "please sit down again. I came here to drive you back to Mallowe, and the cart will not come back for a quarter of an hour."

"You came on purpose!" she exclaimed, feeling, in truth, somewhat awe-struck. "But how kind of you, Lord Walderhurst--how good!"

It was the most unforeseen and amazing experience of her life, and at

once she sought for some reason which could connect with his coming some more interesting person than mere Emily Fox-Seton. Oh,--the thought flashed upon her,--he had come for some reason connected with Lady Agatha. He made her sit down on the heather again, and he took a seat beside her. He looked straight into her eyes.

"You have been crying," he remarked.

There was no use denying it. And what was there in the good gray-brown eye, gazing through the monocle, which so moved her by its suggestion of kindness and--and some new feeling?

"Yes, I have," she admitted. "I don't often--but--well, yes, I have."

"What was it?"

It was the most extraordinary thump her heart gave at this moment. She had never felt such an absolute thump. It was perhaps because she was tired. His voice had lowered itself. No man had ever spoken to her before like that. It made one feel as if he was not an exalted person at all; only a kind, kind one. She must not presume upon his kindness and make much of her prosaic troubles. She tried to smile in a proper casual way.

"Oh, it was a small thing, really," was her effort at treating the matter lightly; "but it seems more important to me than it would to any

one with--with a family. The people I live with--who have been so kind to me--are going away."

"The Cupps?" he asked.

She turned quite round to look at him.

"How," she faltered, "did you know about them?"

"Maria told me," he answered, "I asked her."

It seemed such a human sort of interest to have taken in her. She could not understand. And she had thought he scarcely realised her existence. She said to herself that was so often the case--people were so much kinder than one knew.

She felt the moisture welling in her eyes, and stared steadily at the heather, trying to wink it away.

"I am really glad," she explained hastily. "It is such good fortune for them. Mrs. Cupp's brother has offered them such a nice home. They need never be anxious again."

"But they will leave Mortimer Street--and you will have to give up your room."

"Yes. I must find another." A big drop got the better of her, and flashed on its way down her cheek. "I can find a room, perhaps, but--I can't find----" She was obliged to clear her throat.

"That was why you cried?"

"Yes." After which she sat still.

"You don't know where you will live?"

"No."

She was looking so straight before her and trying so hard to behave discreetly that she did not see that he had drawn nearer to her. But a moment later she realised it, because he took hold of her hand. His own closed over it firmly.

"Will you," he said--"I came here, in fact, to ask you if you will come and live with me?"

Her heart stood still, quite still. London was so full of ugly stories about things done by men of his rank--stories of transgressions, of follies, of cruelties. So many were open secrets. There were men, who, even while keeping up an outward aspect of respectability, were held accountable for painful things. The lives of well-born struggling women

were so hard. Sometimes such nice ones went under because temptation was

so great. But she had not thought, she could not have dreamed----

She got on her feet and stood upright before him. He rose with her, and because she was a tall woman their eyes were on a level. Her own big and honest ones were wide and full of crystal tears.

"Oh!" she said in helpless woe. "Oh!"

It was perhaps the most effective thing a woman ever did. It was so simple that it was heartbreaking. She could not have uttered a word, he was such a powerful and great person, and she was so without help or stay.

Since the occurring of this incident, she has often been spoken of as a beauty, and she has, without doubt, had her fine hours; but Walderhurst has never told her that the most beautiful moment of her life was undoubtedly that in which she stood upon the heather, tall and straight and simple, her hands hanging by her sides, her large, tear-filled hazel eyes gazing straight into his. In the femininity of her frank defencelessness there was an appeal to nature's self in man which was not quite of earth. And for several seconds they stood so and gazed into each other's souls--the usually unilluminated nobleman and the prosaic young woman who lodged on a third floor back in Mortimer Street.

Then, quite quickly, something was lighted in his eyes, and he took a step toward her.

"Good heavens!" he demanded. "What do you suppose I am asking of you?"

"I don't--know," she answered; "I don't--know."

"My good girl," he said, even with some irritation, "I am asking you to be my wife. I am asking you to come and live with me in an entirely respectable manner, as the Marchioness of Walderhurst."

Emily touched the breast of her brown linen blouse with the tips of her fingers.

"You--are--asking--me?" she said.

"Yes," he answered. His glass had dropped out of his eye, and he picked it up and replaced it. "There is Black with the cart," he said. "I will explain myself with greater clearness as we drive back to Mallowe."

The basket of fish was put in the cart, and Emily Fox-Seton was put in. Then the marquis got in himself, and took the reins from his groom.

"You will walk back, Black," he said, "by that path," with a wave of the hand in a diverging direction.

As they drove across the heather, Emily was trembling softly from head to foot. She could have told no human being what she felt. Only a woman who had lived as she had lived and who had been trained as she had been trained could have felt it. The brilliance of the thing which had happened to her was so unheard of and so undeserved, she told herself. It was so incredible that, even with the splendid gray mare's high-held head before her and Lord Walderhurst by her side, she felt that she was only part of a dream. Men had never said "things" to her, and a man was saying them--the Marquis of Walderhurst was saying them. They were not the kind of things every man says or said in every man's way, but they so moved her soul that she quaked with joy.

"I am not a marrying man," said his lordship, "but I must marry, and I like you better than any woman I have ever known. I do not generally like women. I am a selfish man, and I want an unselfish woman. Most women are as selfish as I am myself. I used to like you when I heard Maria speak of you. I have watched you and thought of you ever since I came here. You are necessary to every one, and you are so modest that you know nothing about it. You are a handsome woman, and you are always thinking of other women's good looks."

Emily gave a soft little gasp.

"But Lady Agatha," she said. "I was sure it was Lady Agatha."

"I don't want a girl," returned his lordship. "A girl would bore me to

death. I am not going to dry-nurse a girl at the age of fifty-four. I want a companion."

"But I am so far from clever," faltered Emily.

The marquis turned in his driving-seat to look at her. It was really a very nice look he gave her. It made Emily's cheeks grow pink and her simple heart beat.

"You are the woman I want," he said. "You make me feel quite sentimental."

When they reached Mallowe, Emily had upon her finger the ruby which Lady Maria had graphically described as being "as big as a trouser button." It was, indeed, so big that she could scarcely wear her glove over it. She was still incredible, but she was blooming like a large rose. Lord Walderhurst had said so many "things" to her that she seemed to behold a new heaven and a new earth. She had been so swept off her feet that she had not really been allowed time to think, after that first gasp, of Lady Agatha.

When she reached her bedroom she almost returned to earth as she remembered it. Neither of them had dreamed of this--neither of them. What could she say to Lady Agatha? What would Lady Agatha say to her, though it had not been her fault? She had not dreamed that such a thing could be possible. How could she, oh, how could she?

She was standing in the middle of her room with clasped hands. There was a knock upon the door, and Lady Agatha herself came to her.

What had occurred? Something. It was to be seen in the girl's eyes, and in a certain delicate shyness in her manner.

"Something very nice has happened," she said.

"Something nice?" repeated Emily.

Lady Agatha sat down. The letter from Curzon Street was in her hand half unfolded.

"I have had a letter from mamma. It seems almost bad taste to speak of it so soon, but we have talked to each other so much, and you are so kind, that I want to tell you myself. Sir Bruce Norman has been to talk to papa about--about me."

Emily felt that her cup filled to the brim at the moment.

"He is in England again?"

Agatha nodded gently.

"He only went away to--well, to test his own feelings before he spoke.

Mamma is delighted with him. I am going home to-morrow."

Emily made a little swoop forward.

"You always liked him?" she said.

Lady Agatha's delicate mounting colour was adorable.

"I was quite unhappy," she owned, and hid her lovely face in her hands.

In the morning-room Lord Walderhurst was talking to Lady Maria.

"You need not give Emily Fox-Seton any more clothes, Maria," he said. "I am going to supply her in future. I have asked her to marry me."

Lady Maria lightly gasped, and then began to laugh.

"Well, James," she said, "you have certainly much more sense than most men of your rank and age."

PART TWO