

Chapter Ten

The Osborns were breakfasting in their unpleasant sitting-room in Duke Street when Lady Walderhurst's letter arrived. The toast was tough and smoked, and the eggs were of the variety labelled "18 a shilling" in the shops; the apartment was also redolent of kippered herring, and Captain Osborn was scowling over the landlady's weekly bill when Hester opened the envelope stamped with a coronet. (Each time Emily wrote a note and found herself confronting the coronet on the paper, she blushed a little and felt that she must presently awake from her dream.) Mrs. Osborn herself was looking far from amiable. She was ill and nervous and irritable, and had, in fact, just been crying and wishing that she was dead, which had given rise to unpleasantness between herself and her husband, who was not in the mood to feel patient with nerves.

"Here's one from the Marchioness," she remarked slightly.

"I have had none from the Marquis," sneered Osborn. "He might have condescended a reply--the cold-blooded beggar!"

Hester was reading her letter. As she turned the first page her expression changed. As has previously been suggested, the epistolary methods of Lady Walderhurst were neither brilliant nor literary, and yet Mrs. Osborn seemed to be pleased by what she read. During the reading of a line or so she wore an expression of slowly questioning wonder, which, a little later on, settled into relief.

"I can only say I think it's very decent of them," she ejaculated at last; "really decent!"

Alec Osborn looked up, still scowlingly.

"I don't see any cheque," he observed. "That would be the most decent thing. It's the thing we want most, with this damned woman sending in bills like this for the fourth-rate things we live on, and for her confounded tenth-rate rooms."

"This is better than cheques. It means our having something we couldn't hope for cheques enough to pay for. They are offering to lend us a beautiful old place to live in for the rest of our stay."

"What!" Osborn exclaimed. "Where?"

"Near Palstrey Manor, where they are staying now."

"Near Palstrey! How near?" He had been slouching in his chair and now sat up and leaned forward on the table. He was eager.

Hester referred to the letter again.

"She doesn't say. It is a sort of antiquity, I gather. It's called The Kennel Farm. Have you ever been to Palstrey?"

"Not as a guest." He was generally somewhat sardonic when he spoke of anything connected with Walderhurst. "But once I was in the nearest county town by chance and rode over. By Jove!" starting a little, "I wonder if it can be a rum old place I passed and reined in to have a look at. I hope it is."

"Why?"

"It's near enough to the Manor to be convenient."

"Do you think," hesitating, "that we shall see much of them?"

"We shall if we manage things decently. She likes you, and she's the kind of woman to be sympathising and make a fuss over another woman--particularly one who is under the weather and can be sentimentalised over."

Hester was pushing crumbs about on the tablecloth with her knife, and a dull red showed itself on her cheek.

"I am not going to make capital of--circumstances," she said sullenly.

"I won't."

She was not a woman easily managed, and Osborn had had reason on more than one occasion to realise a certain wicked stubbornness in her. There

was a look in her eye now which frightened him. It was desperately necessary that she should be kept in a tractable mood. As she was a girl with affections, and he was a man without any, he knew what to do.

He got up and went to her side, putting his arm round her shoulders as he sat in a chair near her. "Now, little woman," he said. "Now! For God's sake don't take it that way. Don't think I don't understand how you feel."

"I don't believe you know anything about the way I feel," she said, setting her narrow white teeth and looking more like a native woman than he had ever seen her. A thing which did not aid his affection for her, such as it was, happened to be that in certain moods she suggested a Hindoo beauty to him in a way which brought back to him memories of the past he did not care to have awakened.

"Yes I do, yes I do," he protested, getting hold of her hand and trying to make her look at him. "There are things such a woman as you can't help feeling. It's because you feel them that you must be on your mettle--Lord knows you've got pluck enough--and stand by a fellow now. What shall I do, my God, if you don't?"

He was, in fact, in such straits that the ring of emotion in his voice was not by any means assumed.

"My God!" he repeated, "what shall we all do if you won't?"

She lifted her eyes then to look at him. She was in a sufficiently nervous condition to be conscious that tears were always near.

"Are there worse things than you have told me?" she faltered.

"Yes, worse things than it would be fair to bother you with. I don't want you to be tormented. I was a deuced fool before I met you and began to run straight. Things pile in now that would have lain quiet enough if Walderhurst had not married. Hang it all! he ought to do the decent thing by me. He owes something to the man who may stand in his shoes, after all."

Hester lifted her slow eyes again.

"You've not much of a chance now," she said. "She's a fine healthy woman."

Osborn sprang up and paced the floor, set upon by a sudden spasm of impotent rage. He snapped his teeth rather like a dog.

"Oh! curse her!" he gave forth. "The great, fresh-coloured lumping brute! What did she come into it for? Of all the devilish things that can happen to a man, the worst is to be born to the thing I was born to. To know through your whole life that you're just a stone's-throw from rank and wealth and splendour, and to have to live and look on as an

outsider. Upon my word, I've felt more of an outsider just because of it. There's a dream I've had every month or so for years. It's a dream of opening a letter that tells me he's dead, or of a man coming into the room or meeting me in the street and saying suddenly, 'Walderhurst died last night, Walderhurst died last night!' They're always the same words, 'Walderhurst died last night!' And I wake up shaking and in a cold sweat for joy at the gorgeous luck that's come at last."

Hester gave a low cry like a little howl, and dropped her head on her arms on the table among the cups and saucers.

"She'll have a son! She'll have a son!" she cried. "And then it won't matter whether he dies or not."

"Ough!" was the sound wrenched from Osborn's fury. "And our son might have been in it. Ours might have had it all! Damn--damn!"

"He won't,--he won't now, even if he lives to be born," she sobbed, and clutched at the dingy tablecloth with her lean little hands.

It was hard on her. She had had a thousand feverish dreams he had never heard of. She had lain awake hours at night and stared with wide-open eyes at the darkness, picturing to her inner soul the dream of splendour that she would be part of, the solace for past miseries, the high revenges for past slights that would be hers after the hour in which she heard the words Osborn had just quoted, "Walderhurst died last night!"

Oh! if luck had only helped them! if the spells her Ayah had taught her in secret had only worked as they would have worked if she had been a native woman and had really used them properly! There was a spell she had wrought once which Ameerah had sworn to her was to be relied on. It took ten weeks to accomplish its end. In secret she had known of a man on whom it had been worked. She had found out about it partly from the remote hints which had aided her half knowledge of strange things and by keeping a close watch. The man had died--he had died. She herself, and with her own eyes had seen him begin to ail, had heard of his fevers and pains and final death. He had died. She knew that. And she had tried the thing herself in dead secrecy. And at the fifth week, just as with the native who had died, she heard that Walderhurst was ill. During the next four weeks she was sick with the tension of combined horror and delight. But he did not die in the tenth week. They heard that he had gone to Tangiers with a party of notable people, and that his "slight" indisposition had passed, leaving him in admirable health and spirits.

Her husband had known nothing of her frenzy. She would not have dared to tell him. There were many things she did not tell him. He used to laugh at her native stories of occult powers, though she knew that he had seen some strange things done, as most foreigners had. He always explained such things contemptuously on grounds which presupposed in the performers of the mysteries powers of agility, dexterity, and universal knowledge quite as marvellous as anything occult could have been. He did not like her to show belief in the "tricks of the natives," as he called them. It made a woman look a fool, he said, to be so credulous.

During the last few months a new fever had tormented her. Feelings had awakened in her which were new. She thought things she had never thought before. She had never cared for children or suspected herself of being the maternal woman. But Nature worked in her after her weird fashion. She began to care less for some things and more for others. She cared less for Osborn's moods and was better able to defy them. He began to be afraid of her temper, and she began to like at times to defy his. There had been some fierce scenes between them in which he had found her meet with a flare of fury words she would once have been cowed by. He had spoken one day with the coarse slightingness of a selfish, irritable brute, of the domestic event which was before them. He did not speak twice.

She sprang up before him and shook her clenched fist in his face, so near that he started back.

"Don't say a word!" she cried. "Don't dare--don't dare. I tell you--look out, if you don't want to be killed."

During the outpouring of her frenzy he saw her in an entirely new light and made discoveries. She would fight for her young, as a tigress fights for hers. She was nursing a passion of secret feeling of which he had known nothing. He had not for a moment suspected her of it. She had not seemed that kind of girl. She had been of the kind that cares for finery and social importance and the world's favour, not for sentiments.

On this morning of the letter's arrival he watched her sobbing and clutching the tablecloth, and reflected. He walked up and down and pondered. There were a lot of things to be thought over.

"We may as well accept the invitation at once," he said. "Grovel as much as you choose. The more the better. They'll like it."