

Chapter Eleven

The Osborns arrived at The Kennel Farm on a lovely rainy morning. The green of the fields and trees and hedges was sweetly drenched, and the flowers held drops which sparkled when the fitful sun broke forth and searched for the hidden light in them. A Palstrey carriage comfortably met them and took them to their destination.

As they turned into the lane, Osborn looked out at the red gables and chimneys showing themselves among the trees.

"It's the old place I looked at," he said, "and a jolly old place it is."

Hester was drinking in the pure sweetness of the fresh air and filling her soul with the beauty of such things as she had never seen before. In London she had grown hopeless and sick of spirit. The lodgings in Duke Street, the perpetual morning haddock and questionable eggs and unpaid bills, had been evil things for her. She had reached a point at which she had felt she could bear them no longer. Here, at all events, there would be green trees and clear air, and no landlady. With no rent to pay, there would be freedom from one torment at least.

She had not expected much more than this freedom, however. It had seemed highly probable that there might be discomforts in an ancient farmhouse

of the kind likely to be lent to impecunious relatives.

But before they crossed the threshold it was plain to her that, for some reason, they had been given more. The old garden had been put in order--a picturesque and sweet disorderly order, which had allowed creepers to luxuriate and toss, and flowers to spring out of crannies, and clumps of things to mass themselves without restraint.

The girl's wretched heart lifted itself as they drove up to the venerable brick porch which had somewhat the air of a little church vestibule. Through the opened door she saw a quaint comfort she had not dreamed of. She had not the knowledge of things which would have told her what wonders Emily had done with the place, but she could see that its quaint furnishings were oddly beautiful in their harmony. The heavy chairs and benches and settles seemed to have been part of centuries of farm-house life, and to belong to the place as much as the massive beams and doors.

Hester stood in the middle of the hall and looked about her. Part of it was oak panelled and part was whitewashed. There were deep, low windows cut in the thick walls.

"I never saw anything the least like it," she said.

"You wouldn't expect to see anything like it in India," her husband answered. "And you won't find many places like it in England. I should

like a look at the stables."

He went out almost immediately and took the look in question, finding the result unexpectedly satisfactory. Walderhurst had lent him a decent horse to ride, and there was a respectable little cart for Hester.

Palstrey Manor had "done them" very well. This was a good deal more than he had expected. He knew such hospitality would not have been shown him if he had come to England unmarried. Consequently his good luck was partly a result of Hester's existence in his life. At the same time there awakened in him a consciousness that Hester would not have been likely to produce such results unless in combination with another element in the situation,--the element of another woman who was sympathetic and had some power,--the new Lady Walderhurst, in fact.

"And yet, confound her--confound her!" he thought, as he walked into the loose box to look the mare over and pat her sleekness.

The relations which established themselves between Palstrey and The Kennel Farm were marked by two characteristic features. One of these was that Lord Walderhurst did not develop any warmer interest in the Osborns, and that Lady Walderhurst did. Having acceded to Emily's wishes, and really behaved generously in the matter of providing for his heir presumptive and his wife, Lord Walderhurst felt impelled to no further demonstration of feeling.

"I don't like him any better than I did," he remarked to Emily. "And I

cannot say that Mrs. Osborn attracts me. Of course there is a reason why a kind-hearted woman like yourself should be specially good to her just now. Do anything you wish for them while they are in the neighbourhood. But as for me, the fact that a man is one's heir presumptive is not enough in itself alone to endear him to one, rather the contrary."

Between these two it is to be confessed there existed that rancour which is not weakened by the fact that it remains unexpressed and lurks in the deeps of the inward being. Walderhurst would not have been capable of explaining to himself that the thing he chiefly disliked in this robust, warm-blooded young man was that when he met him striding about with his gun over his shoulder and a keeper behind him, the almost unconscious realisation of the unpleasant truth that he was striding over what might prove to be his own acres, and shooting birds which in the future he would himself possess the right to preserve, to invite other people to shoot, to keep less favoured persons from shooting, as lord of the Manor. This was a truth sufficiently irritating to accentuate all his faults of character and breeding.

Emily, whose understanding of his nature developed with every day of her life, grew into a comprehension of this by degrees. Perhaps her greatest leap forward was taken on the day when, as he was driving her in the cart which had picked her up on the moor, they saw Osborn tramping through a cover with his gun. He did not see them, and a shade of irritation swept Walderhurst's face.

"He seems to feel very much at home," he commented.

Then he was silent for a space during which he did not look pleased.

"If he were my son," he said, "it would be a different matter. If Audrey's child had lived--"

He stopped and gave the tall mare a light cut with his whip. He was evidently annoyed with himself for having spoken.

A hot wave of colour submerged Emily. She felt it rush over her whole body. She turned her face away, hoping Walderhurst would not observe her. This was the first time she had heard him utter his dead wife's name. She had never heard anyone speak it. Audrey had evidently not been a much-beloved or regretted person. But she had had a son.

Her primitive soul had scarcely dared to approach, even with awe, the thought of such a possibility for herself. As in the past she had not had the temerity to dream of herself as a woman who possessed attractions likely to lead to marriage, so she was mentally restrained in these days. There was something spinster-like in the tenor of her thoughts. But she would have laid down her life for this dull man's happiness. And of late she had more than once blamed herself for accepting so much, unthinkingly.

"I did not realise things properly," she had said to herself in humble

pain. "I ought to have been a girl, young and strong and beautiful. His sacrifice was too great, it was immense."

It had been nothing of the sort. He had pleased himself and done what was likely to tend, and had tended, altogether to his own ease and comfort. In any case Emily Fox-Seton was a fine creature, and only thirty-four, and with Alec Osborn at the other side of the globe the question of leaving an heir had been less present and consequently had dwindled in importance.

The nearness of the Osborns fretted him just now. If their child was a son, he would be more fretted still. He was rather glad of a possibility, just looming, of his being called away from England through affairs of importance.

He had spoken to Emily of this possibility, and she had understood that, as his movements and the length of his stay would be uncertain, she would not accompany him.

"There is one drawback to our marriage," he said.

"Is it--is it anything I can remove?" Emily asked.

"No, though you are responsible for it. People seldom can remove the drawbacks they are responsible for. You have taught me to miss you."

"Have I--have I?" cried Emily. "Oh! I am happy!"

She was so happy that she felt that she must pass on some of her good fortune to those who had less. She was beautifully kind to Hester Osborn. Few days passed without the stopping of a Walderhurst carriage before the door of The Kennel Farm. Sometimes Emily came herself to take Mrs. Osborn to drive, sometimes she sent for her to come to lunch and spend the day or night at Palstrey. She felt an interest in the young woman which became an affection. She would have felt interested in her if there had not existed a special reason to call forth sympathy. Hester had many curious and new subjects for conversation. Emily liked her descriptions of Indian life and her weird little stories of the natives. She was charmed with Ameerah, whose nose rings and native dress, combining themselves with her dark mystic face, rare speech, and gliding, silent movements, awakened awe in the rustics and mingled distrust and respect in the servants' hall at Palstrey.

"She's most respectably behaved, my lady, though foreign and strange in her manners," was Jane Cupp's comment. "But she has a way of looking at a person--almost stealthy--that's upset me many a time when I've noticed it suddenly. They say that she knows things, like fortune-telling and spells and love potions. But she will only speak of them quite secret."

Emily gathered that Jane Cupp was afraid of the woman, and kept a cautious eye upon her.

"She is a very faithful servant, Jane," she answered. "She is devoted to Mrs. Osborn."

"I am sure she is, my lady. I've read in books about the faithfulness of black people. They say they're more faithful than white ones."

"Not more faithful than some white ones," said Lady Walderhurst with her good smile. "Ameerah is not more faithful than you, I'm very sure."

"Oh, my lady!" ejaculated Jane, turning red with pleasure. "I do hope not. I shouldn't like to think she could be."

In fact the tropic suggestion of the Ayah's personality had warmed the imagination of the servants' hall, and there had been much talk of many things, of the Osborns as well as of their servants, and thrilling stories of East Indian life had been related by Walderhurst's man, who was a travelled person. Captain Osborn had good sport on these days, and sport was the thing he best loved. He was of the breed of man who can fish, hunt, or shoot all day, eat robust meals and sleep heavily all night; who can do this every day of a year, and in so doing reach his highest point of desire in existence. He knew no other aspirations in life than such as the fortunes of a man like Walderhurst could put him in possession of. Nature herself had built him after the model of the primeval type of English country land-owner. India with her blasting and stifling hot seasons and her steaming rains gave him nothing that he desired, and filled him with revolt against Fate every hour of his life.

His sanguine body loathed and grew restive under heat. At The Kennel Farm, when he sprang out of his bed in the fresh sweetness of the morning and plunged into his tub, he drew every breath with a physical rapture. The air which swept in through the diamond-paned, ivy-hung casements was a joy.

"Good Lord!" he would cry out to Hester through her half-opened door, "what mornings! how a man lives and feels the blood rushing through his veins! Rain or shine, it's all the same to me. I can't stay indoors. Just to tramp through wet or dry heather, or under dripping or shining trees, is enough. How can one believe one has ever lain sweating with one's tongue lolling out, and listened to the whining creak of the punkah through nights too deadly hot to sleep in! It's like remembering hell while one lives in Paradise."

"We shan't live in Paradise long," Hester said once with some bitterness. "Hell is waiting for us."

"Damn it! don't remind a man. There are times when I don't believe it." He almost snarled the answer. It was true that his habit was to enhance the pleasure of his days by thrusting into the background all recollections of the reality of any other existence than that of the hour. As he tramped through fern and heather he would remember nothing but that there was a chance--there was chance, good Lord! After a man not over strong reached fifty-four or five, there were more chances than there had been earlier.

After hours spent in such moods, it was not pleasant to come by accident upon Walderhurst riding his fine chestnut, erect and staid, and be saluted by the grave raising of his whip to his hat. Or to return to the Farm just as the Palstreya barouche turned in at the gate with Lady Walderhurst sitting in it glowing with health and that enjoyable interest in all things which gave her a kind of radiance of eye and colour.

She came at length in a time when she did not look quite so radiant. This, it appeared, was from a reason which might be regarded as natural under the circumstances. A more ardent man than Lord Walderhurst might have felt that he could not undertake a journey to foreign lands which would separate him from a wife comparatively new. But Lord Walderhurst was not ardent, and he had married a woman who felt that he did all things well--that, in fact, a thing must be well because it was his choice to do it. His journey to India might, it was true, be a matter of a few months, and involved diplomatic business for which a certain unimpeachable respectability was required. A more brilliant man, who had been less respectable in the most decorous British sense, would not have served the purpose of the government.

Emily's skin had lost a shade of its healthful freshness, it struck Hester, when she saw her. There was a suggestion of fulness under her eyes. Yet with the bright patience of her smile she defied the remote suspicion that she had shed a tear or so before leaving home. She

explained the situation with an affectionally reverent dwelling upon the dignity of the mission which would temporarily bereave her of her mate. Her belief in Walderhurst's intellectual importance to the welfare of the government was a complete and touching thing.

"It will not be for very long," she said, "and you and I must see a great deal of each other. I am so glad you are here. You know how one misses--" breaking off with an admirable air of determined cheer--"I must not think of that."

Walderhurst congratulated himself seriously during the days before his departure. She was so exactly what he liked a woman to be. She might have made difficulties, or have been sentimental. If she had been a girl, it would have been necessary to set up a sort of nursery for her, but this fine amenable, sensible creature could take perfect care of herself. It was only necessary to express a wish, and she not only knew how to carry it out, but was ready to do so without question. As far as he was concerned, he was willing to leave all to her own taste. It was such decent taste. She had no modern ideas which might lead during his absence to any action likely to disturb or annoy him. What she would like best to do would be to stay at Palstrey and enjoy the beauty of it. She would spend her days in strolling through the gardens, talking to the gardeners, who had all grown fond of her, or paying little visits to old people or young ones in the village. She would help the vicar's wife in her charities, she would appear in the Manor pew at church regularly, make the necessary dull calls, and go to the unavoidable dull dinners

with a faultless amiability and decorum.

"As I remarked when you told me you had asked her to marry you," said Lady Maria on the occasion of his lunching with her on running up to town for a day's business, "you showed a great deal more sense than most men of your age and rank. If people will marry, they should choose the persons least likely to interfere with them. Emily will never interfere with you. She cares a great deal more about your pleasure than her own. And as to that, she's so much like a big, healthy, good child that she would find pleasure wheresoever you dropped her."

This was true, yet the healthy, childish creature had, in deep privacy, cried a little, and was pathetically glad to feel that the Osborns were to be near her, and that she would have Hester to think of and take care of during the summer.

It was pathetic that she should cherish an affection so ingenuous for the Osborns, for one of them at least had no patience with her. To Captain Osborn her existence and presence in the near neighbourhood were offences. He told himself that she was of the particular type of woman he most disliked. She was a big, blundering fool, he said, and her size and very good nature itself got on his nerves and irritated him.

"She looks so deucedly prosperous with her first-rate clothes and her bouncing health," he said.

"The tread of her big feet makes me mad when I hear it."

Hester answered with a shrill little laugh.

"Her big feet are a better shape than mine," she said. "I ought to hate her, and I would if I could, but I can't."

"I can," muttered Osborn between his teeth as he turned to the mantel and scratched a match to light his pipe.