

## Chapter Twelve

When Lord Walderhurst took his departure for India, his wife began to order her daily existence as he had imagined she would. Before he had left her she had appeared at the first Drawing-room, and had spent a few weeks at the town house, where they had given several imposing and serious dinner parties, more remarkable for dignity and good taste than liveliness. The duties of social existence in town would have been unbearable for Emily without her husband. Dressed by Jane Cupp with a passion of fervour, fine folds sweeping from her small, long waist, diamonds strung round her neck, and a tiara or a big star in her full brown hair, Emily was rather superb when supported by the consciousness that Walderhurst's well-carried maturity and long accustomedness were near her. With him she could enjoy even the unlively splendour of a function, but without him she would have been very unhappy. At Palstrey she was ceasing to feel new, and had begun to realise that she belonged to the world she lived in. She was becoming accustomed to her surroundings, and enjoyed them to the utmost. Her easily roused affections were warmed by the patriarchal atmosphere of village life. Most of the Palstrey villagers had touched their forelocks or curtsied to Walderhursts for generations. Emily liked to remember this, and had at once conceived a fondness for the simple folk, who seemed somehow related so closely to the man she worshipped.

Walderhurst had not the faintest conception of what this worship

represented. He did not even reach the length of realising its existence. He saw her ingenuous reverence for and belief in him, and was naturally rather pleased by them. He was also vaguely aware that if she had been a more brilliant woman she would have been a more exacting one, and less easily impressed. If she had been a stupid woman or a clumsy one, he would have detested her and bitterly regretted his marriage. But she was only innocent and gratefully admiring, which qualities, combining themselves with good looks, good health, and good manners, made of a woman something he liked immensely. Really she had looked very nice and attractive when she had bidden him good-by, with her emotional flush and softness of expression and the dewy brightness of her eyes. There was something actually moving in the way her strong hand had wrung his at the last moment.

"I only wish," she had said, "I only do so wish that there was something I could do for you while you are away--something you could leave me to do."

"Keep well and enjoy yourself," he had answered. "That will really please me."

Nature had not so built him that he could suspect that she went home and spent the rest of the morning in his rooms, putting away his belongings with her own hands, just for the mere passion of comfort she felt in touching the things he had worn, the books he had handled, the cushions his head had rested against. She had indeed mentioned to the housekeeper

at Berkeley Square that she wished his lordship's apartments to remain untouched until she herself had looked over them. The obsession which is called Love is an emotion past all explanation. The persons susceptible to its power are as things beneath a spell. They see, hear, and feel that of which the rest of their world is unaware, and will remain unaware for ever. To the endearing and passion-inspiring qualities Emily Walderhurst saw in this more than middle-aged gentleman an unstirred world would remain blind, deaf, and imperceptive until its end transpired. This, however, made not the slightest difference in the reality of these things as she saw and felt and was moved to her soul's centre by them. Bright youth in Agatha Norman, at present joyously girdling the globe with her bridegroom, was moved much less deeply, despite its laughter and love.

A large lump swelled in Emily's throat as she walked about the comfortable, deserted apartments of her James. Large tears dropped on the breast of her dress as they had dropped upon her linen blouse when she walked across the moor to Maundell. But she bravely smiled as she tenderly brushed away with her hand two drops which fell upon a tweed waistcoat she had picked up. Having done this, she suddenly stooped and kissed the rough cloth fervently, burying her face in it with a sob.

"I do love him so!" she whispered, hysterically. "I do so love him, and I shall so miss him!" with the italicised feelingness of old.

The outburst was in fact so strongly italicised that she felt the next

moment almost as if she had been a little indecent. She had never been called upon by the strenuousness of any occasion to mention baldly to Lord Walderhurst that she "loved" him. It had not been necessary, and she was too little used to it not to be abashed by finding herself proclaiming the fact to his very waistcoat itself. She sat down holding the garment in her hands and let her tears fall.

She looked about her at the room and across the corridor through the open door at his study which adjoined it. They were fine rooms, and every book and bust and chair looked singularly suggestive of his personality. The whole house was beautiful and imposing in Emily's eyes. "He has made all my life beautiful and full of comfort and happiness," she said, trembling. "He has saved me from everything I was afraid of, and there is nothing I can do. Oh!" suddenly dropping a hot face on her hands, "if I were only Hester Osborn. I should be glad to suffer anything, or die in any way. I should have paid him back--just a little--if I might."

For there was one thing she had learned through her yearning fervour, not through any speech of his. All the desire and pride in him would be fed full and satisfied if he could pass his name on to a creature of his own flesh and blood. All the heat his cold nature held had concentrated itself in a secret passion centred on this thing. She had begun to awaken to a suspicion of this early in their marriage, and afterwards by processes of inclusion and exclusion she had realised the proud intensity of his feeling despite his reserve and silence. As for her,

she would have gone to the stake, or have allowed her flesh to be cut into pieces to form that which would have given him reason for exultation and pride. Such was the helpless, tragic, kindly love and yearning of her.

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The thing filled her with a passion of tenderness for Hester Osborn. She yearned over her, too. Her spinster life had never brought her near to the mystery of birth. She was very ignorant and deeply awed by the mere thought of it. At the outset Hester had been coldly shy and reticent, but as they saw each other more she began to melt before the unselfish warmth of the other woman's overtures of friendship. She was very lonely and totally inexperienced. As Agatha Slade had gradually fallen into intimacy of speech, so did she. She longed so desperately for companionship that the very intensity of her feelings impelled her to greater openness than she had at first intended.

"I suppose men don't know," she said to herself sullenly, in thinking of Osborn, who spent his days out of doors. "At any rate, they don't care."

Emily cared greatly, and was so full of interest and sympathy that there was something like physical relief in talking to her.

"You two have become great pals," Alec said, on an afternoon when he stood at a window watching Lady Walderhurst's carriage drive away. "You

spend hours together talking. What is it all about?"

"She talks a good deal about her husband. It is a comfort to her to find someone to listen. She thinks he is a god. But we principally talk about--me."

"Don't discourage her," laughed Osborn. "Perhaps she will get so fond of you that she will not be willing to part with us, as she will be obliged to take both to keep one."

"I wish she would, I wish she would!" sighed Hester, tossing up her hands in a languid, yet fretted gesture.

The contrast between herself and this woman was very often too great to be equably borne. Even her kindness could not palliate it. The simple perfection of her country clothes, the shining skins of her horses, the smooth roll of her carriage, the automatic servants who attended her, were suggestive of that ease and completeness in all things, only to be compassed by long-possessed wealth. To see every day the evidences of it while one lived on charitable sufferance on the crumbs which fell from the master's table was a galling enough thing, after all. It would always have been galling. But it mattered so much more now--so much more to Hester than she had known it could matter even in those days when as a girl she had thirstily longed for it. In those days she had not lived near enough to it all to know the full meaning and value of it--the

beauty and luxury, the stateliness and good taste. To have known it in this way, to have been almost part of it and then to leave it, to go back to a hugger-mugger existence in a wretched bungalow hounded by debt, pinched and bound hard and fast by poverty, which offered no future prospect of bettering itself into decent good luck! Who could bear it?

Both were thinking the same thing as their eyes met.

"How are we to stand it, after this?" she cried out sharply.

"We can't stand it," he answered. "Confound it all, something must happen."

"Nothing will," she said; "nothing but that we shall go back worse off than before."

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At this period Lady Walderhurst went to London again to shop, and spent two entire happy days in buying beautiful things of various kinds, which were all to be sent to Mrs. Osborn at The Kennel Farm, Palstrey. She had never enjoyed herself so much in her life as she did during those two days when she sat for hours at one counter after another looking at exquisite linen and flannel and lace. The days she had spent with Lady Maria in purchasing her trousseau had not compared with these two. She

looked actually lovely as she almost fondled the fine fabrics, smiling with warm softness at the pretty things shown her. She spent, in fact, good deal of money, and luxuriated in so doing as she would never have luxuriated in spending it in finery for herself. Nothing indeed seemed too fairy-like in its fineness, no quantity of lace seemed in excess. Her heart positively trembled in her breast sometimes, and she found strange tears rising in her eyes.

"They are so sweet," she said plaintively to the silence of her own bedroom as she looked some of her purchases over. "I don't know why they give me such a feeling. They look so little and--helpless, and as if they were made to hold in one's arms. It's absurd of me, I daresay."

The morning the boxes arrived at The Kennel Farm, Emily came too. She was in the big carriage, and carried with her some special final purchases she wanted to bring herself. She came because she could not have kept away. She wanted to see the things again, to be with Hester when she unpacked them, to help her, to look them all over, to touch them and hold them in her hands.

She found Hester in the large, low-ceilinged room in which she slept. The big four-post bed was already snowed over with a heaped-up drift of whiteness, and open boxes were scattered about. There was an odd expression in the girl's eyes, and she had a red spot on either cheek.

"I did not expect anything like this," she said. "I thought I should

have to make some plain, little things myself, suited to its station," with a wry smile. "They would have been very ugly. I don't know how to sew in the least. You forget that you were not buying things for a prince or a princess, but for a little beggar."

"Oh, don't!" cried Emily, taking both her hands. "Let us be happy! It was so nice to buy them. I never liked anything so much in my life."

She went and stood by the bedside, taking up the things one by one, touching up frills of lace and smoothing out tucks.

"Doesn't it make you happy to look at them?" she said.

"You look at them," said Hester, staring at her, "as if the sight of them made you hungry, or as if you had bought them for yourself."

Emily turned slightly away. She said nothing. For a few moments there was a dead silence.

Hester spoke again. What in the world was it in the mere look of the tall, straight body of the woman to make her feel hot and angered.

"If you had bought them for yourself," she persisted, "they would be worn by a Marquis of Walderhurst."

Emily laid down the robe she had been holding. She put it on the bed,

and turned round to look at Hester Osborn with serious eyes.

"They may be worn by a Marquis of Walderhurst, you know," she answered. "They may."

She was remotely hurt and startled, because she felt in the young woman something she had felt once or twice before, something resentful in her thoughts of herself, as if for the moment she represented to her an enemy.

The next moment, however, Hester Osborn fell upon her with embraces.

"You are an angel to me," she cried. "You are an angel, and I can't thank you. I don't know how."

Emily Walderhurst patted her shoulder as she kindly enfolded her in warm arms.

"Don't thank me," she half whispered emotionally. "Don't. Just let us enjoy ourselves."