

Chapter Thirteen

Alec Osborn rode a good deal in these days. He also walked a good deal, sometimes with a gun over his shoulder and followed by a keeper, sometimes alone. There was scarcely a square yard of the Palstrey Manor lands he had not tramped over. He had learned the whole estate by heart, its woods, its farms, its moorlands. A morbid secret interest in its beauties and resources possessed him. He could not resist the temptation to ask apparently casual questions of keepers and farmers when he found himself with them. He managed to give his inquiries as much the air of accident as possible, but he himself knew that they were made as a result of a certain fevered curiosity. He found that he had fallen into the habit of continually making plans connected with the place. He said to himself, "If it were mine I would do this, or that. If I owned it, I would make this change or that one. I would discharge this keeper or put another man on such a farm." He tramped among the heather thinking these things over, and realising to the full what the pleasure of such powers would mean to a man such as himself, a man whose vanity had never been fed, who had a desire to control and a longing for active out-of-door life.

"If it were mine, if it were mine!" he would say to himself. "Oh! damn it all, if it were only mine!"

And there were other places as fine, and finer places he had never seen,--Oswyth, Hurst, and Towers,--all Walderhurst's all belonging to this one respectable, elderly muff. Thus he summed up the character of his relative. As for himself he was young, strong, and with veins swelling with the insistent longing for joyful, exultant life. The sweating, panting drudgery of existence in India was a thought of hell to him. But there it was, looming up nearer and nearer with every heavenly English day that passed. There was nothing for it but to go back--go back, thrust one's neck into the collar again, and sweat and be galled to the end. He had no ambitions connected with his profession. He realised loathingly in these days that he had always been waiting, waiting.

The big, bright-faced woman who was always hanging about Hester, doing her favours, he actually began to watch feverishly. She was such a fool; she always looked so healthy, and she was specially such a fool over Walderhurst. When she had news of him, it was to be seen shining in her face.

She had a sentimental school-girl fancy that during his absence she would apply herself to the task of learning to ride. She had been intending to do so before he went away; they had indeed spoken of it together, and Walderhurst had given her a handsome, gentle young mare. The creature was as kind as she was beautiful. Osborn, who was celebrated for his horsemanship, had promised to undertake to give the lessons.

A few days after her return from London with her purchases, she asked the husband and wife to lunch with her at Palstrey, and during the meal broached the subject.

"I should like to begin soon, if you can spare the time for me," she said. "I want to be able to go out with him when he comes back. Do you think I shall be slow in learning? Perhaps I ought to be lighter to ride well."

"I think you will be pretty sure to have a first-class seat," Osborn answered. "You will be likely to look particularly well."

"Do you think I shall? How good you are to encourage me. How soon could I begin?"

She was quite agreeably excited. In fact, she was delighted by innocent visions of herself as Walderhurst's equestrian companion. Perhaps if she sat well, and learned fine control of her horse, he might be pleased, and turn to look at her, as they rode side by side, with that look of approval and dawning warmth which brought such secret joy to her soul.

"When may I take my first lesson?" she said quite eagerly to Captain Osborn, for whom a footman was pouring out a glass of wine.

"As soon," he answered, "as I have taken out the mare two or three times

myself. I want to know her thoroughly. I would not let you mount her until I had learned her by heart."

They went out to the stables after lunch and visited the mare in her loose box. She was a fine beast, and seemed as gentle as a child.

Captain Osborn asked questions of the head groom concerning her. She had a perfect reputation, but nevertheless she was to be taken over to the Kennel stables a few days before Lady Walderhurst mounted her.

"It is necessary to be more than careful," Osborn said to Hester that night. "There would be the devil and all to pay if anything went wrong."

The mare was brought over the next morning. She was a shining bay, and her name was Faustine.

In the afternoon Captain Osborn took her out. He rode her far and learned her thoroughly before he brought her back. She was as lively as a kitten, but as kind as a dove. Nothing could have been better tempered and safer. She would pass anything, even the unexpected appearance of a road-mending engine turning a corner did not perceptibly disturb her.

"Is she well behaved?" Hester asked at dinner time.

"Yes, apparently," was his answer; "but I shall take her out once or twice again."

He did take her out again, and had only praise for her on each occasion. But the riding lessons did not begin at once. In fact he was, for a number of reasons, in a sullen and unsociable humour which did not incline him towards the task he had undertaken. He made various excuses for not beginning the lessons, and took Faustine out almost every day.

But Hester had an idea that he did not enjoy his rides. He used to return from them with a resentful, sombre look, as if his reflections had not been pleasant company for him. In truth they were not pleasant company. He was beset by thoughts he did not exactly care to be beset by--thoughts which led him farther than he really cared to go, which did not incline him to the close companionship of Lady Walderhurst. It was these thoughts which led him on his long rides; it was one of them which impelled him, one morning, as he was passing a heap of broken stone, piled for the mending of the ways by the roadside, to touch Faustine with heel and whip. The astonished young animal sprang aside curvetting. She did not understand, and to horse-nature the uncomprehended is alarming. She was more bewildered and also more fretted when, in passing the next stone heap, she felt the same stinging touches. What did it mean? Was she to avoid this thing, to leap at sight of it, to do what? She tossed her delicate head and snorted in her trouble. The country road was at some distance from Palstrey, and was little frequented. No one was in sight. Osborn glanced about him to make sure of this fact. A long stretch of road lay before him, with stone heaps piled at regular intervals. He had taken a big whiskey and soda at the last wayside inn

he had passed, and drink did not make him drunk so much as mad. He pushed the mare ahead, feeling in just the humour to try experiments with her.

* * * * *

"Alec is very determined that you shall be safe on Faustine," Hester said to Emily. "He takes her out every day."

"It is very good of him," answered Emily.

Hester thought she looked a trifle nervous, and wondered why. She did not say anything about the riding lessons, and in fact had seemed of late less eager and interested. In the first place, it had been Alec who had postponed, now it was she. First one trifling thing and then another seemed to interpose.

"The mare is as safe as a feather-bed," Osborn said to her one afternoon when they were taking tea on the lawn at Palstrey. "You had better begin now if you wish to accomplish anything before Lord Walderhurst comes back. What do you hear from him as to his return?"

Emily had heard that he was likely to be detained longer than he had expected. It seemed always to be the case that people were detained by such business. He was annoyed, but it could not be helped. There was a rather tired look in her eyes and she was paler than usual.

"I am going up to town to-morrow," she said. "The riding lessons might begin after I come back."

"Are you anxious about anything?" Hester asked her as she was preparing for the drive back to The Kennel Farm.

"No, no," Emily answered. "Only--"

"Only what?"

"I should be so glad if--if he were not away."

Hester gazed reflectively at her suddenly quivering face.

"I don't think I ever saw a woman so fond of a man," she said.

Emily stood still. She was quite silent. Her eyes slowly filled. She had never been able to say much about what she felt for Walderhurst. Hers was a large, dumb, primitive affection.

She sat at her open bedroom window a long time that evening. She rested her chin upon her hand and looked up at the deeps of blue powdered with the diamond dust of stars. It seemed to her that she had never looked up and seen such myriads of stars before. She felt far away from earthly things and tremulously uplifted. During the last two weeks she had lived

in a tumult of mind, of amazement, of awe, of hope and fear. No wonder that she looked pale and that her face was full of anxious yearning. There were such wonders in the world, and she, Emily Fox-Seton, no, Emily Walderhurst, seemed to have become part of them.

She clasped her hands tight together and leaned forward into the night with her face turned upwards. Very large drops began to roll fast down her cheeks, one after the other. The argument of scientific observation might have said she was hysterical, and whether with or without reason is immaterial. She did not try to check her tears or wipe them away, because she did not know that she was crying. She began to pray, and heard herself saying the Lord's Prayer like a child.

"Our Father who art in Heaven--Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name," she murmured imploringly.

She said the prayer to the end, and then began it over again. She said it three or four times, and her appeal for daily bread and the forgiveness of trespasses expressed what her inarticulate nature could not have put into words. Beneath the entire vault of heaven's dark blue that night there was nowhere lifted to the Unknown a prayer more humbly passion-full and gratefully imploring than her final whisper.

"For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen, amen."

When she left her seat at the window and turned towards the room again, Jane Cupp, who was preparing for the morrow's journey and was just entering with a dress over her arm, found herself restraining a start at sight of her.

"I hope you are quite well, my lady," she faltered.

"Yes," Lady Walderhurst answered. "I think I am very well--very well, Jane. You will be quite ready for the early train to-morrow morning."

"Yes, my lady, quite."

"I have been thinking," said Emily gently, almost in a tone of reverie, "that if your uncle had not wanted your mother so much it would have been nice to have her here with us. She is such an experienced person, and so kind. I never forget how kind she was to me when I had the little room in Mortimer Street."

"Oh! my lady, you was kind to us," cried Jane.

She recalled afterwards, with tears, how her ladyship moved nearer to her and took her hand with what Jane called "her wonderful good look," which always brought a lump to her throat.

"But I always count on you, Jane," she said. "I count on you so much."

"Oh! my lady," Jane cried again, "it's my comfort to believe it. I'd lay down my life for your ladyship, I would indeed."

Emily sat down, and on her face there was a soft, uplifted smile.

"Yes," she said, and Jane Cupp saw that she was reflective again, and the words were not addressed exactly, to herself, "one would be quite ready to lay down one's life for the person one loved. It seems even a little thing, doesn't it?"