

Chapter Fourteen

Lady Walderhurst remained in town a week, and Jane Cupp remained with her, in the house in Berkeley Square, which threw open its doors to receive them on their arrival quite as if they had never left it. The servants' hall brightened temporarily in its hope that livelier doings might begin to stir the establishment, but Jane Cupp was able to inform inquirers that the visit was only to be a brief one.

"We are going back to Palstrey next Monday," she explained. "My lady prefers the country, and she is very fond of Palstrey; and no wonder. It doesn't seem at all likely she'll come to stay in London until his lordship gets back."

"We hear," said the head housemaid, "that her ladyship is very kind to Captain Osborn and his wife, and that Mrs. Osborn's in a delicate state of health."

"It would be a fine thing for us if it was in our family," remarked an under housemaid who was pert.

Jane Cupp looked extremely reserved.

"Is it true," the pert housemaid persisted, "that the Osborns can't abide her?"

"It's true," said Jane, severely, "that she's goodness itself to them, and they ought to adore her."

"We hear they don't," put in the tallest footman. "And who wonders. If she was an angel, there's just a chance that she may give Captain Osborn a wipe in the eye, though she is in her thirties."

"It's not for us," said Jane, stiffly, "to discuss thirties or forties or fifties either, which are no business of ours. There's one gentleman, and him a marquis, as chose her over the heads of two beauties in their teens, at least."

"Well, for the matter of that," admitted the tall footman, "I'd have chose her myself, for she's a fine woman."

Lady Maria was just on the point of leaving South Audley Street to make some visits in the North, but she came and lunched with Emily, and was in great form.

She had her own opinion of a number of matters, some of which she discussed, some of which she kept to herself. She lifted her gold lorgnette and looked Emily well over.

"Upon my word, Emily," she said, "I am proud of you. You are one of my successes. Your looks are actually improving. There's something rather

etherealised about your face to-day. I quite agree with Walderhurst in all the sentimental things he says about you."

She said this last partly because she liked Emily and knew it would please her to hear that her husband went to the length of dwelling on her charms in his conversation with other people, partly because it entertained her to see the large creature's eyelids flutter and a big blush sweep her cheek.

"He really was in great luck when he discovered you," her ladyship went on briskly. "As for that, I was in luck myself. Suppose you had been a girl who could not have been left. As Walderhurst is short of female relatives, it would have fallen to me to decently dry-nurse you. And there would have been the complications arising from a girl being baby enough to want to dance about to places, and married enough to feel herself entitled to defy her chaperone; she couldn't have been trusted to chaperone herself. As it is, Walderhurst, can go where duty calls, etc., and I can make my visits and run about, and you, dear thing, are quite happy at Palstrey playing Lady Bountiful and helping the little half-breed woman to expect her baby. I daresay you sit and make dolly shirts and christening robes hand in hand."

"We enjoy it all very much," Emily answered, adding imploringly, "please don't call her a little half-breed woman. She's such a dear little thing, Lady Maria."

Lady Maria indulged in the familiar chuckle and put up her lorgnette to examine her again.

"There's a certain kind of early Victorian saintliness about you, Emily Walderhurst, which makes my joy," she said. "You remind me of Lady Castlewood, Helen Pendennis, and Amelia Sedley, with the spitefulness and priggishness and catty ways left out. You are as nice as Thackeray thought they were, poor mistaken man. I am not going to suffuse you with blushes by explaining to you that there is what my nephew would call a jolly good reason why, if you were not an early Victorian and improved Thackerayan saint, you would not be best pleased at finding yourself called upon to assist at this interesting occasion. Another kind of woman would probably feel like a cat towards the little Osborn. But even the mere reason itself, as a reason, has not once risen in your benign and pellucid mind. You have a pellucid mind, Emily; I should be rather proud of the word if I had invented it myself to describe you. But I didn't. It was Walderhurst. You have actually wakened up the man's intellects, such as they are."

She evidently had a number of opinions of the Osborns. She liked neither of them, but it was Captain Osborn she especially disliked.

"He is really an underbred person," she explained, "and he hasn't the sharpness to know that is the reason Walderhurst detests him. He had vulgar, cheap sort of affairs, and nearly got into the kind of trouble people don't forgive. What a fool a creature in his position is to

offend the taste of the man he may inherit from, and who, if he were not antagonistic to him, would regard him as a sort of duty. It wasn't his immorality particularly. Nobody is either moral or immoral in these days, but penniless persons must be decent. It's all a matter of taste and manners. I haven't any morals myself, my dear, but I have beautiful manners. A woman can have the kind of manners which keep her from breaking the Commandments. As to the Commandments, they are awfully easy

things not to break. Who wants to break them, good Lord! Thou shalt do no murder. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not commit, etc. Thou shalt not bear false witness. That's simply gossip and lying, and they are bad manners. If you have good manners, you don't."

She chatted on in her pungent little worldly, good-humoured way through the making of a very excellent lunch. After which she settled her smart bonnet with clever touches, kissed Emily on both cheeks, and getting into her brougham rolled off smiling and nodding.

Emily stood at the drawing-room window and watched her equipage roll round the square and into Charles Street, and then turned away into the big, stately empty room, sighing without intending to do so while she smiled herself.

"She's so witty and so amusing," she said; "but one would no more think of telling her anything than one would think of catching a butterfly and holding it while one made it listen. She would be so bored if she

was confided in."

Which was most true. Never in her life had her ladyship allowed herself the indiscretion of appearing a person in whom confidences might be reposed. She had always had confidences enough of her own to take care of, without sharing those of other people.

"Good heavens!" she had exclaimed once, "I should as soon think of assuming another woman's wrinkles."

On the first visit Lady Walderhurst made to The Kennel Farm the morning after her return to Palstrey, when Alec Osborn helped her from her carriage, he was not elated by the fact that he had never seen her look so beautifully alive and blooming during his knowledge of her. There was a fine rose on her cheek, and her eyes were large and happily illumined.

"How well you look!" broke from him with an involuntariness he was alarmed to realise as almost spiteful. The words were an actual exclamation which he had not meant to utter, and Emily Walderhurst even started a trifle and looked at him with a moment's question.

"But you look well, too," she answered. "Palstrey agrees with both of us. You have such a colour."

"I have been riding," he replied. "I told you I meant to know Faustine thoroughly before I let you mount her. She is ready for you now. Can you

take your first lesson to-morrow?"

"I--I don't quite know," she hesitated. "I will tell you a little later.

Where is Hester?"

Hester was in the drawing-room. She was lying on a sofa before an open window and looking rather haggard and miserable. She had, in fact, just had a curious talk with Alec which had ended in something like a scene. As Hester's health grew more frail, her temper became more fierce, and of late there had been times when a certain savagery, concealed with difficulty in her husband's moods, affected her horribly.

This morning she felt a new character in Emily's manner. She was timid and shy, and a little awkward. Her child-like openness of speech and humour seemed obscured. She had less to say than usual, and at the same time there was a suggestion of restless unease about her. Hester Osborn, after a few minutes, began to have an odd feeling that the woman's eyes held a question or a desire in them.

She had brought some superb roses from the Manor gardens, and she moved

about arranging them for Hester in vases.

"It is beautiful to come back to the country," she said. "When I get into the carriage at the station and drive through the sweet air, I always feel as if I were beginning to live again, and as if in London I

had not been quite alive. It seemed so heavenly in the rose garden at Palstre to-day, to walk about among those thousands of blooming lovely things breathing scent and nodding their heavy, darling heads."

"The roads are in a beautiful condition for riding," Hester said, "and Alec says that Faustine is perfect. You ought to begin to-morrow morning. Shall you?"

She spoke the words somewhat slowly, and her face did not look happy. But, then, it never was a really happy face. The days of her youth had been too full of the ironies of disappointment.

There was a second's silence, and then she said again:

"Shall you, if it continues fine?"

Emily's hands were full of roses, both hands, and Hester saw both hands and roses tremble. She turned round slowly and came towards her. She looked nervous, awkward, abashed, and as if for that moment she was a big girl of sixteen appealing to her and overwhelmed with queer feelings, and yet the depths of her eyes held a kind of trembling, ecstatic light. She came and stood before her, holding the trembling roses as if she had been called up for confession.

"I--I mustn't," she half whispered. The corners of her lips drooped and quivered, and her voice was so low that Hester could scarcely hear it.

But she started and half sat up.

"You mustn't?" she gasped; yes, really it was gasped.

Emily's hand trembled so that the roses began to fall one by one, scattering a rain of petals as they dropped.

"I mustn't," she repeated, low and shakily. "I had--reason.--I went to town to see--somebody. I saw Sir Samuel Brent, and he told me I must not. He is quite sure."

She tried to calm herself and smile. But the smile quivered and ended in a pathetic contortion of her face. In the hope of gaining decent self-control, she bent down to pick up the dropped roses. Before she had picked up two, she let all the rest fall, and sank kneeling among them, her face in her hands.

"Oh, Hester, Hester!" she panted, with sweet, stupid unconsciousness of the other woman's heaving chest and glaring eyes. "It has come to me too, actually, after all."