

Chapter Fifteen

The Palstrey Manor carriage had just rolled away carrying Lady Walderhurst home. The big, low-ceilinged, oak-beamed farm-house parlour was full of the deep golden sunlight of the late afternoon, the air was heavy with the scent of roses and sweet-peas and mignonette, the adorable fragrance of English country-house rooms. Captain Osborn inhaled it at each breath as he stood and looked out of the diamond-paned window, watching the landau out of sight. He felt the scent and the golden glow of the sunset light as intensely as he felt the dead silence which reigned between himself and Hester almost with the effect of a physical presence. Hester was lying upon the sofa again, and he knew she was staring at his back with that sardonic widening of her long eyes, a thing he hated, and which always foreboded things not pleasant to face.

He did not turn to face them until the footman's cockade had disappeared finally behind the tall hedge, and the tramp of the horses' feet was deadening itself in the lane. When he ceased watching and listening, he wheeled round suddenly.

"What does it all mean?" he demanded. "Hang her foolish airs and graces. Why won't she ride, for she evidently does not intend to."

Hester laughed, a hard, short, savage little un-mirthful sound it was.

"No, she doesn't intend to," she answered, "for many a long day, at least, for many a month. She has Sir Samuel Brent's orders to take the greatest care of herself."

"Brent's? Brent's?"

Hester struck her lean little hands together and laughed this time with a hint at hysteric shrillness.

"I told you so, I told you so!" she cried. "I knew it would be so, I knew it! By the time she reaches her thirty-sixth birthday there will be a new Marquis of Walderhurst, and he won't be either you or yours." And as she finished, she rolled over on the sofa, and bit the cushions with her teeth as she lay face downwards on them. "He won't be you, or belong to you," she reiterated, and then she struck the cushions with her clenched fist.

He rushed over to her, and seizing her by the shoulders shook her to and fro.

"You don't know what you are talking about," he said; "you don't know what you are saying."

"I do! I do! I do!" she screamed under her breath, and beat the cushions at every word. "It's true, it's true. She's drivelling about it,

drivelling!"

Alec Osborn threw back his head, drawing in a hard breath which was almost a snort of fury.

"By God!" he cried, "if she went out on Faustine now, she would not come back!"

His rage had made him so far beside himself that he had said more than he intended, far more than he would have felt safe. But the girl was as far beside herself as he was, and she took him up.

"Serve her right," she cried. "I shouldn't care. I hate her! I hate her! I told you once I couldn't, but I do. She's the biggest fool that ever lived. She knew nothing of what I felt. I believe she thought I would rejoice with her. I didn't know whether I should shriek in her face or scream out laughing. Her eyes were as big as saucers, and she looked at me as if she felt like the Virgin Mary after the Annunciation. Oh! the stupid, inhuman fool!"

Her words rushed forth faster and faster, she caught her breath with gasps, and her voice grew more shrill at every sentence. Osborn shook her again.

"Keep quiet," he ordered her. "You are going into hysterics, and it won't do. Get hold of yourself."

"Go for Ameerah," she gasped, "or I'm afraid I can't. She knows what to do."

He went for Ameerah, and the silently gliding creature came bringing her remedies with her. She looked at her mistress with stealthily questioning but affectionate eyes, and sat down on the floor rubbing her hands and feet in a sort of soothing massage. Osborn went out of the room, and the two women were left together. Ameerah knew many ways of calming her mistress's nerves, and perhaps one of the chief ones was to lead her by subtle powers to talk out her rages and anxieties. Hester never knew that she was revealing herself and her moods until after her interviews with the Ayah were over. Sometimes an hour or so had passed before she began to realise that she had let out things which she had meant to keep secret. It was never Ameerah who talked, and Hester was never conscious that she talked very much herself. But afterwards she saw that the few sentences she had uttered were such as would satisfy curiosity if the Ayah felt it. Also she was not, on the whole, at all sure that the woman felt it. She showed no outward sign of any interest other than the interest of a deep affection. She loved her young mistress to-day as passionately as she had loved her as a child when she had held her in her bosom as if she had been her own. By the time Emily Walderhurst had reached Palstrey, Ameerah knew many things. She understood that her mistress was as one who, standing upon the brink of a precipice, was being slowly but surely pushed over its edge--pushed, pushed by Fate. This was the thing imaged in her mind when she shut

herself up in her room and stood alone in the midst of the chamber clenching her dark hands high above her white veiled head, and uttering curses which were spells, and spells which were curses.

Emily was glad that she had elected to be alone as much as possible, and had not invited people to come and stay with her. She had not invited people, in honest truth, because she felt shy of the responsibility of entertainment while Walderhurst was not with her. It would have been proper to invite his friends, and his friends were all people she was too much in awe of, and too desirous to please to be able to enjoy frankly as society. She had told herself that when she had been married a few years she would be braver.

And now her gladness was so devout that it was pure rejoicing. How could she have been calm, how could she have been conversational, while through her whole being there surged but one thought. She was sure that while she talked to people she would have been guilty of looking as if she was thinking of something not in the least connected with themselves.

If she had been less romantically sentimental in her desire to avoid all semblance of burdening her husband she would have ordered him home at once, and demanded as a right the protection of his dignity and presence. If she had been less humble she would have felt the importance of her position and the gravity of the claims it gave her to his consideration, instead of being lost in prayerful gratitude to heaven.

She had been rather stupidly mistaken in not making a confidante of Lady Maria Bayne, but she had been, in her big girl shyness, entirely like herself. In some remote part of her nature she had shrunk from a certain look of delighted amusement which she had known would have betrayed itself, despite her ladyship's good intentions, in the eyes assisted by the smart gold lorgnette. She knew she was inclined to be hyper-emotional on this subject, and she felt that if she had seen the humour trying to conceal itself behind the eye-glasses, she might have been hysterical enough to cry even while she tried to laugh, and pass her feeling off lightly. Oh, no! Oh, no! Somehow she knew that at such a moment, for some fantastic, if subtle, reason, Lady Maria would only see her as Emily Fox-Seton, that she would have actually figured before her for an instant as poor Emily Fox-Seton making an odd confession. She could not have endured it without doing something foolish, she felt that she would not, indeed.

So Lady Maria went gaily away to make her round of visits and be the amusing old life and soul of house-party after house-party, suspecting nothing of a possibility which would actually have sobered her for a moment.

Emily passed her days at Palstrey in a state of happy exaltation. For a week or so they were spent in wondering whether or not she should write a letter to Lord Walderhurst which should convey the information to him which even Lady Maria would have regarded as important, but the more she

argued the question with herself, the less she wavered from her first intention. Lady Maria's frank congratulation of herself and Lord Walderhurst in his wife's entire unexactingness had indeed been the outcome of a half-formed intention to dissipate amiably even the vaguest inclination to verge on expecting things from people. While she thought Emily unlikely to allow herself to deteriorate into an encumbrance, her ladyship had seen women in her position before, whose marriages had made perfect fools of them through causing them to lose their heads completely and require concessions and attentions from their newly acquired relations which bored everybody. So she had lightly patted and praised Emily for the course of action she preferred to "keep her up to."

"She's the kind of woman ideas sink into if they are well put," she had remarked in times gone by. "She's not sharp enough to see that things are being suggested to her, but a suggestion acts upon her delightfully."

Her suggestions acted upon Emily as she walked about the gardens at Palstrey, pondering in the sunshine and soothed by the flower scents of the warmed borders. Such a letter written to Walderhurst might change his cherished plans, concerning which she knew he held certain ambitions. He had been so far absorbed in them that he had gone to India at a time of the year which was not usually chosen for the journey. He had become further interested and absorbed after he had reached the country, and he was evidently likely to prolong his stay as he had not

thought of prolonging it. He wrote regularly though not frequently, and Emily had gathered from the tone of his letters that he was more interested than he had ever been in his life before.

"I would not interfere with his work for anything in the world," she said. "He cares more for it than he usually cares for things. I care for everything--I have that kind of mind; an intellectual person is different. I am perfectly well and happy here. And it will be so nice to look forward."

She was not aware how Lady Maria's suggestions had "sunk in." She would probably have reached the same conclusion without their having been made, but since they had been made, they had assisted her. There was one thing of all others she felt she could not possibly bear, which was to realise that she herself could bring to her James's face an expression she had once or twice seen others bring there (Captain Osborn notably),--an expression of silent boredom on the verge of irritation. Even radiant domestic joy might not be able to overrule this, if just at this particular juncture he found himself placed in the position of a man whom decency compelled to take the next steamer to England.

If she had felt tenderly towards Hester Osborn before, the feeling was now increased tenfold. She went to see her oftener, she began to try to persuade her to come and stay at Palstrey. She was all the more kind because Hester seemed less well, and was in desperate ill spirits. Her small face had grown thin and yellow, she had dark rings under her eyes,

and her little hands were hot and looked like bird's claws. She did not sleep and had lost her appetite.

"You must come and stay at Palstrey for a few days," Emily said to her.

"The mere change from one house to another may make you sleep better."

But Hester was not inclined to avail herself of the invitation. She made obstacles and delayed acceptance for one reason and another. She was, in fact, all the more reluctant because her husband wished her to make the visit. Their opposed opinions had resulted in one of their scenes.

"I won't go," she had said at first. "I tell you I won't."

"You will," he answered. "It will be better for you."

"Will it be worse for me if I don't?" she laughed feverishly. "And how will it be better for you if I do? I know you are in it."

He lost his temper and was indiscreet, as his temper continually betrayed him into being.

"Yes, I am in it," he said through his teeth, "as you might have the sense to see. Everything is the better for us that throws us with them, and makes them familiar with the thought of us and our rights."

"Our rights," the words were a shrill taunt.

"What rights have you, likely to be recognised, unless you kill her. Are you going to kill her?"

He had a moment of insanity.

"I'd kill her and you too if it was safe to do it. You both deserve it!"

He flung across the room, having lost his wits as well as his temper. But a second later both came back to him as in a revulsion of feeling.

"I talk like a melodramatic fool," he cried. "Oh, Hester, forgive me!" He knelt on the floor by her side, caressing her imploringly. "We both take fire in the same way. We are both driven crazy by this damned blow. We're beaten; we may as well own it and take what we can get. She's a fool, but she's better than that pompous, stiff brute Walderhurst, and she has a lot of pull over him he knows nothing about. The smug animal is falling in love with her in his way. She can make him do the decent thing. Let us keep friends with her."

"The decent thing would be a thousand a year," wailed Hester, giving in to his contrition in spite of herself, because she had once been in love with him, and because she was utterly helpless. "Five hundred a year wouldn't be indecent."

"Let us keep on her good side," he said, fondling her, with a relieved

countenance. "Tell her you will come and that she is an angel, and that you are sure a visit to the Manor will save your life."

They went to Palstrey a few days later. Ameerah accompanied them in attendance upon her mistress, and the three settled down into a life so regular that it scarcely seemed to wear the aspect of a visit. The Osborns were given some of the most beautiful and convenient rooms in the house. No other visitors were impending and the whole big place was at their disposal. Hester's boudoir overlooked the most perfect nooks of garden, and its sweet chintz draperies and cushions and books and flowers made it a luxurious abode of peace.

"What shall I do," she said on the first evening in it as she sat in a soft chair by the window, looking out at the twilight and talking to Emily. "What shall I do when I must go away?"

"I don't mean only from here,--I mean away from England, to loathly India."

"Do you dislike it so?" Emily asked, roused to a new conception of her feeling by her tone.

"I could never describe to you how much," fiercely. "It is like going to the place which is the opposite of Heaven."

"I did not know that," pityingly. "Perhaps--I wonder if something might

not be done: I must talk to my husband."

Ameerah seemed to develop an odd fancy for the society of Jane Cupp, which Jane was obliged to confess to her mistress had a tendency to produce in her system "the creeps."

"You must try to overcome it, Jane," Lady Walderhurst said. "I'm afraid it's because of her colour. I've felt a little silly and shy about her myself, but it isn't nice of us. You ought to read 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,' and all about that poor religious Uncle Tom, and Legree, and Eliza crossing the river on the blocks of ice."

"I have read it twice, your ladyship," was Jane's earnestly regretful response, "and most awful it is, and made me and mother cry beyond words. And I suppose it is the poor creature's colour that's against her, and I'm trying to be kind to her, but I must own that she makes me nervous. She asks me such a lot of questions in her queer way, and stares at me so quiet. She actually asked me quite sudden the other day if I loved the big Mem Sahib. I didn't know what she could mean at first, but after a while I found out it was her Indian way of meaning your ladyship, and she didn't intend disrespect, because she spoke of you most humble afterwards, and called his lordship the Heaven born."

"Be as kind as you can to her, Jane," instructed her mistress. "And take her a nice walk occasionally. I daresay she feels very homesick here."

What Ameerah said to her mistress was that these English servant women were pigs and devils, and could conceal nothing from those who chose to find out things from them. If Jane had known that the Ayah could have told her of every movement she made during the day or night, of her up-gettings and down-lyings, of the hour and moment of every service done for the big Mem Sahib, of why and how and when and where each thing was done, she would have been frightened indeed.

One day, it is true, she came into Lady Walderhurst's sleeping apartment to find Ameerah standing in the middle of it looking round its contents with restless, timid, bewildered eyes. She wore, indeed, the manner of an alarmed creature who did not know how she had got there.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Jane. "You have no right in this part of the house. You're taking a great liberty, and your mistress will be angry."

"My Mem Sahib asked for a book," the Ayah quite shivered in her alarmed confusion. "Your Mem Sahib said it was here. They did not order me, but I thought I would come to you. I did not know it was forbidden."

"What was the book?" inquired Jane severely. "I will take it to her ladyship."

But Ameerah was so frightened that she had forgotten the name, and when

Jane knocked at the door of Mrs. Osborn's boudoir, it was empty, both the ladies having gone into the garden.

But Ameerah's story was quite true, Lady Walderhurst said in the evening when Jane spoke of the matter as she dressed her for dinner. They had been speaking of a book containing records of certain historical Walderhursts. It was one Emily had taken from the library to read in her bedroom.

"We did not ask her to go for it. In fact I did not know the woman was within hearing. She moves about so noiselessly one frequently does not know when she is near. Of course she meant very well, but she does not know our English ways."

"No, my lady, she does not," said Jane, respectfully but firmly. "I took the liberty of telling her she must keep to her own part of the house unless required by your ladyship."

"You mustn't frighten the poor creature," laughed her mistress. She was rather touched indeed by the slavish desire to please and do service swiftly which the Ayah's blunder seemed to indicate. She had wished to save her mistress even the trouble of giving the order. That was her Oriental way, Emily thought, and it was very affectionate and child-like.

Being reminded of the book again, she carried it down herself into the

drawing-room. It was a volume she was fond of because it recorded romantic stories of certain noble dames of Walderhurst lineage.

Her special predilection was a Dame Ellena, who, being left with but few servitors in attendance during her lord's absence from his castle on a foraging journey into an enemy's country, had defended the stronghold boldly against the attack of a second enemy who had adroitly seized the opportunity to forage for himself. In the cellars had been hidden treasure recently acquired by the usual means, and knowing this, Dame Ellena had done splendid deeds, marshalling her small forces in such way as deceived the attacking party and showing herself in scorn upon the battlements, a fierce, beauteous woman about to give her lord an heir, yet fearing naught, and only made more fierce and full of courage by this fact. The son, born but three weeks later, had been the most splendid and savage fighter of his name, and a giant in build and strength.

"I suppose," Emily said when they discussed the legend after dinner, "I suppose she felt that she could do anything," with her italics. "I daresay nothing could make her afraid, but the thought that something might go wrong while her husband was away. And strength was given her."

She was so thrilled that she got up and walked across the room with quite a fine sweep of heroic movement in her momentary excitement. She held her head up and smiled with widening eyes.

But she saw Captain Osborn drag at his black moustache to hide an unattractive grin, and she was at once abashed into feeling silly and shy. She sat down again with awkward self-consciousness.

"I'm afraid I'm making you laugh at me," she apologised, "but that story always gives me such a romantic feeling. I like her so."

"Oh! not at all, not all," said Osborn. "I was not laughing really; oh no!"

But he had been, and had been secretly calling her a sentimental, ramping idiot.

It was a great day for Jane Cupp when her mother arrived at Palstrey Manor. It was a great day for Mrs. Cupp also. When she descended from the train at the little country station, warm and somewhat flushed by her emotions and the bugled splendours of her best bonnet and black silk mantle, the sight of Jane standing neatly upon the platform almost overcame her. Being led to his lordship's own private bus, and seeing her trunk surrounded by the attentions of an obsequious station-master and a liveried young man, she was conscious of concealing a flutter with dignified reserve.

"My word, Jane!" she exclaimed after they had taken their seats in the vehicle. "My word, you look as accustomed to it as if you had been born in the family."

But it was when, after she had been introduced to the society in the servants' hall, she was settled in her comfortable room next to Jane's own that she realised to the full that there were features of her position which marked it with importance almost startling. As Jane talked to her, the heat of the genteel bonnet and beaded mantle had nothing whatever to do with the warmth which moistened her brow.

"I thought I'd keep it till I saw you, mother," said the girl decorously. "I know what her ladyship feels about being talked over. If I was a lady myself, I shouldn't like it. And I know how deep you'll feel it, that when the doctor advised her to get an experienced married person to be at hand, she said in that dear way of hers, 'Jane, if your uncle could spare your mother, how I should like to have her. I've never forgot her kindness in Mortimer Street.'"

Mrs. Cupp fanned her face with a handkerchief of notable freshness.

"If she was Her Majesty," she said, "she couldn't be more sacred to me, nor me more happy to be allowed the privilege."

Jane had begun to put her mother's belongings away. She was folding and patting a skirt on the bed. She fussed about a little nervously and then lifted a rather embarrassed face.

"I'm glad you are here, mother," she said. "I'm thankful to have

you!"

Mrs. Cupp ceased fanning and stared at her with a change of expression. She found herself involuntarily asking her next question in a half whisper.

"Why, Jane, what is it?"

Jane came nearer.

"I don't know," she answered, and her voice also was low. "Perhaps I'm silly and overanxious, because I am so fond of her. But that Ameerah, I actually dream about her."

"What! The black woman?",

"If I was to say a word, or if you did, and we was wrong, how should we feel? I've kept my nerves to myself till I've nearly screamed sometimes. And my lady would be so hurt if she knew. But--well," in a hurried outburst, "I do wish his lordship was here, and I do wish the Osborns wasn't. I do wish it, I tell you that."

"Good Lord!" cried Mrs. Cupp, and after staring with alarmed eyes a second or so, she wiped a slight dampness from her upper lip.

She was of the order of female likely to take a somewhat melodramatic

view of any case offering her an opening in that direction.

"Jane!" she gasped faintly, "do you think they'd try to take her life?"

"Goodness, no!" ejaculated Jane, with even a trifle of impatience.

"People like them daren't. But suppose they was to try to, well, to upset her in some way, what a thing for them it would be."

After which the two women talked together for some time in whispers, Jane bringing a chair to place opposite her mother's. They sat knee to knee, and now and then Jane shed a tear from pure nervousness. She was so appalled by the fear of making a mistake which, being revealed by some chance, would bring confusion upon and pain of mind to her lady.

"At all events," was Mrs. Cupp's weighty observation when their conference was at an end, "here we both are, and two pairs of eyes and ears and hands and legs is a fat lot better than one, where there's things to be looked out for."

Her training in the matter of subtlety had not been such as Ameerah's, and it may not be regarded as altogether improbable that her observation of the Ayah was at times not too adroitly concealed, but if the native woman knew that she was being remarked, she gave no sign of her knowledge. She performed her duties faithfully and silently, she gave no trouble, and showed a gentle subservience and humbleness towards the white servants which won immense approbation. Her manner towards Mrs.

Cupp's self was marked indeed by something like a tinge of awed deference, which, it must be confessed, mollified the good woman, and awakened in her a desire to be just and lenient even to the dark of skin and alien of birth.

"She knows her betters when she sees them, and has pretty enough manners

for a black," the object of her respectful obeisances remarked. "I wonder if she's ever heard of her Maker, and if a little brown Testament with good print wouldn't be a good thing to give her?"

This boon was, in fact, bestowed upon her as a gift. Mrs. Cupp bought it for a shilling at a small shop in the village. Ameerah, in whose dusky being was incorporated the occult faith of lost centuries, and whose gods had been gods through mystic ages, received the fat, little brown book with down-dropped lids and grateful obeisance. These were her words to her mistress:

"The fat old woman with protruding eyes bestowed it upon me. She says it is the book of her god. She has but one. She wishes me to worship him. Am I a babe to worship such a god as would please her. She is old, and has lost her mind."

Lady Walderhurst's health continued all that could be desired. She arose smiling in the morning, and bore her smile about with her all day. She walked much in the gardens, and spent long, happy hours sewing in her

favourite sitting-room. Work which she might have paid other women to do, she did with her own hands for the mere sentimental bliss of it. Sometimes she sat with Hester and sewed, and Hester lay on a sofa and stared at her moving hands.

"You know how to do it, don't you?" she once said.

"I was obliged to sew for myself when I was so poor, and this is delightful," was Emily's answer.

"But you could buy it all and save yourself the trouble."

Emily stroked her bit of cambric and looked awkward.

"I'd rather not," she said.

Well as she was, she began to think she did not sleep quite so soundly as had been habitual with her. She started up in bed now and again as if she had been disturbed by some noise, but when she waited and listened she heard nothing. At least this happened on two or three occasions. And then one night, having been lying folded in profound, sweet sleep, she sprang up in the black darkness, wakened by an actual, physical reality of sensation, the soft laying of a hand upon her naked side,--that, and nothing else.

"What is that? Who is there?" she cried. "Someone is in the room!"

Yes, someone was there. A few feet from her bed she heard a sobbing sigh, then a rustle, then followed silence. She struck a match and, getting up, lighted candles. Her hand shook, but she remembered that she must be firm with herself.

"I must not be nervous," she said, and looked the room over from end to end.

But it contained no living creature, nor any sign that living creature had entered it since she had lain down to rest. Gradually the fast beating of her heart had slackened, and she passed her hand over her face in bewilderment.

"It wasn't like a dream at all," she murmured; "it really wasn't. I felt it."

Still as absolutely nothing was to be found, the sense of reality diminished somewhat, and being so healthy a creature, she regained her composure, and on going back to bed slept well until Jane brought her early tea.

Under the influence of fresh morning air and sunlight, of ordinary breakfast and breakfast talk with the Osborns, her first convictions receded so far that she laughed a little as she related the incident.

"I never had such a real dream in my life," she said; "but it must have been a dream."

"One's dreams are very real sometimes," said Hester.

"Perhaps it was the Palstreya ghost," Osborn laughed. "It came to you because you ignore it." He broke off with a slight sudden start and stared at her a second questioningly. "Did you say it put its hand on your side?" he asked.

"Don't tell her silly things that will frighten her. How ridiculous of you," exclaimed Hester sharply. "It's not proper."

Emily looked at both of them wonderingly.

"What do you mean?" she said. "I don't believe in ghosts. It won't frighten me, Hester. I never even heard of a Palstreya ghost."

"Then I am not going to tell you of one," said Captain Osborn a little brusquely, and he left his chair and went to the sideboard to cut cold beef.

He kept his back towards them, and his shoulders looked uncommunicative and slightly obstinate. Hester's face was sullen. Emily thought it sweet of her to care so much, and turned upon her with grateful eyes.

"I was only frightened for a few minutes, Hester," she said. "My dreams are not vivid at all, usually."

But howsoever bravely she ignored the shock she had received, it was not without its effect, which was that occasionally there drifted into her mind a recollection of the suggestion that Palstrey had a ghost. She had never heard of it, and was in fact of an orthodoxy so ingenuously entire as to make her feel that belief in the existence of such things was a sort of defiance of ecclesiastical laws. Still, such stories were often told in connection with old places, and it was natural to wonder what features marked this particular legend. Did it lay hands on people's sides when they were asleep? Captain Osborn had asked his question as if with a sudden sense of recognition. But she would not let herself think of the matter, and she would not make inquiries.

The result was that she did not sleep well for several nights. She was annoyed at herself, because she found that she kept lying awake as if listening or waiting. And it was not a good thing to lose one's sleep when one wanted particularly to keep strong.

Jane Cupp during this week was, to use her own words, "given quite a turn" by an incident which, though a small matter, might have proved untoward in its results.

The house at Palstrey, despite its age, was in a wonderful state of preservation, the carved oak balustrades of the stairways being

considered particularly fine.

"What but Providence," said Jane piously, in speaking to her mother the next morning, "made me look down the staircase as I passed through the upper landing just before my lady was going down to dinner. What but Providence I couldn't say. It certainly wasn't because I've done it before that I remember. But just that one evening I was obliged to cross the landing for something, and my eye just lowered itself by accident, and there it was!"

"Just where it would have tripped her up. Good Lord! it makes my heart turn over to hear you tell it. How big a bit of carving was it?" Mrs. Cupp's opulent chest trimmings heaved.

"Only a small piece that had broken off from old age and worm-eatenness, I suppose, but it had dropped just where she wouldn't have caught sight of it, and ten to one would have stepped on it and turned her ankle and been thrown from the top to the bottom of the whole flight. Suppose I hadn't seen it in time to pick it up before she went down. Oh, dear! Oh, dear! Mother!"

"I should say so!" Mrs. Cupp's manner approached the devout. This incident it was which probably added to Jane's nervous sense of responsibility. She began to watch her mistress's movements with hyper-sensitive anxiety. She fell into the habit of going over her bedroom two or three times a day, giving a sort of examination to its

contents.

"Perhaps I'm so fond of her that it's making me downright silly," she said to her mother; "but it seems as if I can't help it. I feel as if I'd like to know everything she does, and go over the ground to make sure of it before she goes anywhere. I'm so proud of her, mother; I'm just as proud as if I was some connection of the family, instead of just her maid. It'll be such a splendid thing if she keeps well and everything goes as it should. Even people like us can see what it means to a gentleman that can go back nine hundred years. If I was Lady Maria Bayne, I'd be here and never leave her. I tell you nothing could drive me from her."

"You are well taken care of," Hester had said. "That girl is devoted to you. In her lady's maid's way she'd fight for your life."

"I think she is as faithful to me as Ameerah is to you," Emily answered. "I feel sure Ameerah would fight for you."

Ameerah's devotion in these days took the form of a deep-seated hatred of the woman whom she regarded as her mistress's enemy.

"It is an evil thing that she should take this place," she said. "She is an old woman. What right hath she to think she may bear a son. Ill luck will come of it. She deserves any ill fortune which may befall her."

"Sometimes," Lady Walderhurst once said to Osborn, "I feel as if Ameerah disliked me. She looks at me in such a curious, stealthy way."

"She is admiring you," was his answer. "She thinks you are something a little supernatural, because you are so tall and have such a fresh colour."

There was in the park at Palstrey Manor a large ornamental pool of water, deep and dark and beautiful because of the age and hugeness of the trees which closed around it, and the water plants which encircled and floated upon it. White and yellow flags and brown velvet rushes grew thick about its edge, and water-lilies opened and shut upon its surface. An avenue of wonderful limes led down to a flight of mossy steps, by which in times gone by people had descended to the boat which rocked idly in the soft green gloom. There was an island on it, on which roses had been planted and left to run wild; early in the year daffodils and other spring flowers burst up through the grass and waved scented heads. Lady Walderhurst had discovered the place during her honeymoon, and had loved it fondly ever since. The avenue leading to it was her favourite walk; a certain seat under a tree on the island her favourite resting-place.

"It is so still there," she had said to the Osborns. "No one ever goes there but myself. When I have crossed the little old bridge and sit down among the greenness with my book or work, I feel as if there was no world at all. There is no sound but the rustle of the leaves and the

splash of the moor-hens who come to swim about. They don't seem to be afraid of me, neither do the thrushes and robins. They know I shall only sit still and watch them. Sometimes they come quite near."

She used, in fact, to take her letter-writing and sewing to the sweet, secluded place and spend hours of pure, restful bliss. It seemed to her that her life became more lovely day by day.

Hester did not like the pool. She thought it too lonely and silent. She preferred her beflowered boudoir or the sunny garden. Sometimes in these days she feared to follow her own thoughts. She was being pushed--pushed towards the edge of her precipice, and it was only the working of Nature that she should lose her breath and snatch at strange things to stay herself. Between herself and her husband a sort of silence had grown. There were subjects of which they never spoke, and yet each knew that the other's mind was given up to thought of them day and night. There were black midnight hours when Hester, lying awake in her bed, knew that Alec lay awake in his also. She had heard him many a time turn over with a caught breath and a smothered curse. She did not ask herself what he was thinking of. She knew. She knew because she was thinking of the same things herself. Of big, fresh, kind Emily Walderhurst lost in her dreams of exultant happiness which never ceased to be amazed and grateful to prayerfulness; of the broad lands and great, comfortable houses; of all it implied to be the Marquis of Walderhurst or his son; of the long, sickening voyage back to India; of the hopeless muddle of life in an

ill-kept bungalow; of wretched native servants, at once servile and stubborn and given to lies and thefts. More than once she was forced to turn on her face that she might smother her frenzied sobs in her pillow.

It was on such a night--she had awakened from her sleep to notice such stillness in Osborn's adjoining room, that she thought him profoundly asleep--that she arose from her bed to go and sit at her open window.

She had not been seated there many minutes before she became singularly conscious, she did not know how, of some presence near her among the bushes in the garden below. It had indeed scarcely seemed to be sound or movement which had attracted her attention, and yet it must have been one or both, for she involuntarily turned to a particular spot.

Yes, something, someone, was standing in a corner, hidden by shrubbery. It was the middle of the night, and people were meeting. She sat still and almost breathless. She could hear nothing and saw nothing but, between the leafage, a dim gleam of white. Only Ameerah wore white. After a few seconds' waiting she began to think a strange thing, though she presently realised that, taking all things into consideration, it was not strange at all. She got up very noiselessly and stole into her husband's room. He was not there; the bed was empty, though he had slept there earlier in the night.

She went back to her own bed and got into it again. In ten minutes' time Captain Osborn crept upstairs and returned to bed also. Hester made no

sign and did not ask any questions. She knew he would have told her nothing, and also she did not wish to hear. She had seen him speaking to Ameerah in the lane a few days before, and now that he was meeting her in the night she knew that she need not ask herself what the subject of their consultation might be. But she looked haggard in the morning.

Lady Walderhurst herself did not look well, For the last two or three nights she had been starting from her sleep again with that eerie feeling of being wakened by someone at her bedside, though she had found no one when she had examined the room on getting up.

"I am sorry to say I am afraid I am getting a little nervous," she had said to Jane Cupp. "I will begin to take valerian, though it is really very nasty."

Jane herself had a somewhat harried expression of countenance. She did not mention to her mistress that for some days she had been faithfully following a line of conduct she had begun to mark out for herself. She had obtained a pair of list slippers and had been learning to go about softly. She had sat up late and risen from her bed early, though she had not been rewarded by any particularly marked discoveries. She had thought, however, that she observed that Ameerah did not look at her as much as had been her habit, and she imagined she rather avoided her. All she said to Lady Walderhurst was:

"Yes, my lady, mother thinks a great deal of valerian to quiet the

nerves. Will you have a light left in your room to-night, my lady?"

"I am afraid I could not sleep with a light," her mistress answered. "I am not used to one."

She continued to sleep, disturbedly some nights, in the dark. She was not aware that on some of the nights Jane Cupp either slept or laid awake in the room nearest to her. Jane's own bedroom was in another part of the house, but in her quiet goings about in the list shoes she now and then saw things which made her nervously determined to be within immediate call.

"I don't say it isn't nerves, mother," she said, "and that I ain't silly to feel so suspicious of all sorts of little things, but there's nights when I couldn't stand it not to be quite near her."