

## Chapter Sixteen

The Lime Avenue was a dim, if lovely, place at twilight. When the sun was setting, broad lances of gold slanted through the branches and glorified the green spaces with mellow depths of light. But later, when the night was drawing in, the lines of grey tree-trunks, shadowed and canopied by boughs, suggested to the mind the pillars of some ruined cathedral, desolate and ghostly.

Jane Cupp, facing the gloom of it during her lady's dinner-hour, and glancing furtively from side to side as she went, would have been awed by the grey stillness, even if she had not been in a timorous mood to begin with. In the first place, the Lime Avenue, which was her ladyship's own special and favourite walk, was not the usual promenade of serving-maids. Even the gardeners seldom set foot in it unless to sweep away dead leaves and fallen wood. Jane herself had never been here before. This evening she had gone absolutely because she was following Ameerah.

She was following Ameerah because, during the afternoon tea-hour in the servants' hall, she had caught a sentence or so in the midst of a gossiping story, which had made her feel that she should be unhappy if she did not go down the walk and to the water-side,--see the water, the boat, the steps, everything.

"My word, mother!" she had said, "it's a queer business for a respectable girl that's maid in a great place to be feeling as if she had to watch black people, same as if she was in the police, and not daring to say a word; for if I did say a word, Captain Osborn's clever enough to have me sent away from here in a jiffy. And the worst of it is," twisting her hands together, "there mayn't be anything going on really. If they were as innocent as lambs they couldn't act any different; and just the same, things might have happened by accident."

"That's the worst of it," was Mrs. Cupp's fretted rejoinder. "Any old piece of carving might have dropped out of a balustrade, and any lady that wasn't well might have nightmare and be disturbed in her sleep."

"Yes," admitted Jane, anxiously, "that is the worst of it. Sometimes I feel so foolish I'm all upset with myself."

The gossip in servants' halls embraces many topics. In country houses there is naturally much to be said of village incidents, of the scandals of cottages and the tragedies of farms. This afternoon, at one end of the table the talk had been of a cottage scandal which had verged on tragedy. A handsome, bouncing, flaunting village girl had got into that "trouble" which had been anticipated for her by both friends and enemies for some time. Being the girl she was, much venomous village social stir had resulted. It had been predicted that she would "go up to London," or that she would drown herself, having an impudent high spirit which brought upon her much scornful and derisive flouting on her evil day.

The manor servants knew a good deal of her, because she had been for a while a servant at The Kennel Farm, and had had a great fancy for Ameerah, whom it had pleased her to make friends with. When she fell suddenly ill, and for days lay at the point of death, there was a stealthy general opinion that Ameerah, with her love spells and potions, could have said much which might have been enlightening, if she had chosen. The girl had been in appalling danger. The village doctor, who had been hastily called in, had at one moment declared that life had left her body. It was, in fact, only Ameerah who had insisted that she was not dead. After a period of prostration, during which she seemed a corpse, she had slowly come back to earthly existence. The graphic descriptions of the scenes by her bedside, of her apparent death, her cold and bloodless body, her lagging and ghastly revival to consciousness, aroused in the servants' hall a fevered interest. Ameerah was asked questions, and gave such answers as satisfied herself if not her interlocutors. She was perfectly aware of the opinions of her fellow servitors. She knew all about them while they knew nothing whatsoever about her. Her limited English could be used as a means of baffling them. She smiled, and fell into Hindustani when she was pressed.

Jane Cupp heard both questions and answers. Ameerah professed to know nothing but such things as the whole village knew. Towards the end of the discussion, however, in a mixture of broken English and Hindustani, she conveyed that she had believed that the girl would drown herself. Asked why, she shook her head, then said that she had seen her by the Mem Sahib's lake at the end of the trees. She had asked if the water was

deep enough, near the bridge, to drown. Ameerah had answered that she did not know.

There was a general exclamation. They all knew it was deep there. The women shuddered as they remembered how deep they had been told it was at

that particular spot. It was said that there was no bottom to it.

Everybody rather revelled in the gruesomeness of the idea of a bottomless piece of water. Someone remembered that there was a story about it. As much as ninety years ago two young labourers on the place had quarrelled about a young woman. One day, in the heat of jealous rage one had seized the other and literally thrown him into the pond. He had never been found. No drags could reach his body. He had sunk into the blackness for ever.

Ameerah sat at the table with downcast eyes. She had a habit of sitting silent with dropped eyes, which Jane could not bear. As she drank her tea she watched her in spite of herself.

After a few minutes had passed, her appetite for bread and butter deserted her. She got up and left the hall, looking pale.

The mental phases through which she went during the afternoon ended in her determination to go down the avenue and to the water's side this evening. It could be done while her ladyship and her guests were at dinner. This evening the Vicar and his wife and daughter were dining at

the Manor.

Jane took in emotionally all the mysterious silence and dimness of the long tree-pillared aisle, and felt a tremor as she walked down it, trying to hold herself in hand by practical reflections half whispered.

"I'm just going to have a look, to make sure," she said, "silly or not. I've got upset through not being able to help watching that woman, and the way to steady my nerves is to make sure I'm just giving in to foolishness."

She walked as fast as she could towards the water. She could see its gleam in the dim light, but she must pass a certain tree before she could see the little bridge itself.

"My goodness! What's that?" she said suddenly. It was something white, which rose up as if from the ground, as if from the rushes growing at the water's edge.

Just a second Jane stood, and choked, and then suddenly darted forward, running as fast as she could. The white figure merely moved slowly away among the trees. It did not run or seem startled, and as Jane ran she caught it by its white drapery, and found herself, as she had known she would, dragging at the garments of Ameerah. But Ameerah only turned round and greeted her with a welcoming smile, mild enough to damp any excitement.

"What are you doing here?" Jane demanded. "Why do you come to this place?"

Ameerah answered her with simple fluency in Hindustani, with her manner of not realising that she was speaking to a foreigner who could not understand her. What she explained was that, having heard that Jane's Mem Sahib came here to meditate on account of the stillness, she herself had formed the habit of coming to indulge in prayer and meditation when the place was deserted for the day. She commended the place to Jane, and to Jane's mother, whom she believed to be holy persons given to devotional exercises. Jane shook her.

"I don't understand a word you say," she cried. "You know I don't. Speak in English."

Ameerah shook her head slowly, and smiled again with patience. She endeavoured to explain in English which Jane was sure was worse than she had ever heard her use before. Was it forbidden that a servant should come to the water?

She was far too much for Jane, who was so unnerved that she burst into tears.

"You are up to some wickedness," she sobbed; "I know you are. You're past bearing. I'm going to write to people that's got the right to do

what I daren't. I'm going back to that bridge."

Ameerah looked at her with a puzzled amiability for a few seconds. She entered into further apologies and explanations in Hindustani. In the midst of them her narrow eyes faintly gleamed, and she raised a hand.

"They come to us. It is your Mem Sahib and her people. Hear them."

She spoke truly. Jane had miscalculated as to her hour, or the time spent at the dinner-table had been shorter than usual. In fact, Lady Walderhurst had brought her guests to see the young moon peer through the lime-trees, as she sometimes did when the evening was warm.

Jane Cupp fled precipitately. Ameerah disappeared also, but without precipitation or any sign of embarrassment.

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"You look as if you had not slept well, Jane," Lady Walderhurst remarked in the morning as her hair was being brushed. She had glanced into the glass and saw that it reflected a pale face above her own, and that the pale face had red rims to its eyes.

"I have been a bit troubled by a headache, my lady," Jane answered.

"I have something like a headache myself." Lady Walderhurst's voice had

not its usual cheerful ring. Her own eyes looked heavy. "I did not rest well. I have not rested well for a week. That habit of starting from my sleep feeling that some sound has disturbed me is growing on me. Last night I dreamed again that someone touched my side. I think I shall be obliged to send for Sir Samuel Brent."

"My lady," exclaimed Jane feverishly, "if you would--if you would."

Lady Walderhurst's look at her was nervous and disturbed.

"Do you--does your mother think I am not as well as I should be, Jane?" she said.

Jane's hands were actually trembling.

"Oh no, my lady. Oh no! But if Sir Samuel could be sent for, or Lady Maria Bayne, or--or his lordship--"

The disturbed expression of Lady Walderhurst's face changed to something verging on alarm. It was true that she began to be horribly frightened. She turned upon Jane, pallor creeping over her skin.

"Oh!" she cried, a sound of almost child-like fear and entreaty in her voice. "I am sure you think I am ill, I am sure you do. What--what is it?"

She leaned forward suddenly and rested her forehead on her hands, her elbows supported by the dressing-table. She was overcome by a shock of dread.

"Oh! if anything should go wrong!" in a faint half wail; "if anything could happen!" She could not bear the mere thought. It would break her heart. She had been so happy. God had been so good.

Jane was inwardly convulsed with contrition commingled with anger at her own blundering folly. Now it was she herself who had "upset" her ladyship, given her a fright that made her pale and trembling. What did she not deserve for being such a thoughtless fool. She might have known. She poured forth respectfully affectionate protestations.

"Indeed, I beg your pardon, my lady. Indeed, it's only my silliness! Mother was saying yesterday that she had never seen a lady so well and in as good spirits. I have no right to be here if I make such mistakes. Please, my lady--oh! might mother be allowed to step in a minute to speak to you?"

Emily's colour came, back gradually. When Jane went to her mother, Mrs. Cupp almost boxed her ears.

"That's just the way with girls," she said. "No more sense than a pack of cats. If you can't keep quiet you'd better just give up. Of course she'd think you meant they was to be sent for because we was certain she

was a dying woman. Oh my! Jane Cupp, get away!"

She enjoyed her little interview with Lady Walderhurst greatly. A woman whose opinion was of value at such a time had the soundest reasons for enjoying herself. When she returned to her room, she sat and fanned herself with a pocket handkerchief and dealt judicially with Jane.

"What we've got to do," she said, "is to think, and think we will. Tell her things outright we must not, until we've got something sure and proved. Then we can call on them that's got the power in their hands. We can't call on them till we can show them a thing no one can't deny. As to that bridge, it's old enough to be easy managed, and look accidental if it broke. You say she ain't going there to-day. Well, this very night, as soon as it's dark enough, you and me will go down and have a look at it. And what's more, we'll take a man with us. Judd could be trusted. Worst comes to worst, we're only taking the liberty of making sure it's safe, because we know it is old and we're over careful."

As Jane had gathered from her, by careful and apparently incidental inquiry, Emily had had no intention of visiting her retreat. In the morning she had, in fact, not felt quite well enough. Her nightmare had shaken her far more on its second occurring. The stealthy hand had seemed not merely to touch, but to grip at her side, and she had been physically unable to rise for some minutes after her awakening. This experience had its physical and mental effects on her.

She did not see Hester until luncheon, and after luncheon she found her to be in one of her strange humours. She was often in these strange humours at this time. She wore a nervous and strained look, and frequently seemed to have been crying. She had new lines on her forehead between the eyebrows. Emily had tried in vain to rouse and cheer her with sympathetic feminine talk. There were days when she felt that for some reason Hester did not care to see her.

She felt it this afternoon, and not being herself at the high-water mark of cheerfulness, she was conscious of a certain degree of discouragement. She had liked her so much, she had wanted to be friends with her and to make her life an easier thing, and yet she appeared somehow to have failed. It was because she was so far from being a clever woman. Perhaps she might fail in other things because she was not clever. Perhaps she was never able to give to people what they wanted, what they needed. A brilliant woman had such power to gain and hold love.

After an hour or so spent in trying to raise the mental temperature of Mrs. Osborn's beflowered boudoir, she rose and picked up her little work-basket.

"Perhaps you would take a nap if I left you," she said. "I think I will stroll down to the lake."

She quietly stole away, leaving Hester on her cushions.