Chapter Seventeen

A few minutes later a knock at the door being replied to by Hester's curt "Come in!" produced the modest entry of Jane Cupp, who had come to make a necessary inquiry of her mistress. "Her ladyship is not here; she has gone out." Jane made an altogether involuntary step forward. Her face became the colour of her clean white apron.

"Out!" she gasped.

Hester turned sharply round.

"To the lake," she said. "What do you mean by staring in that way?"

Jane did not tell her what she meant. She incontinently ran from the room without any shadow of a pretence at a lady's maid's decorum.

She fled through the rooms, to make a short cut to the door opening on to the gardens. Through that she darted, and flew across paths and flowerbeds towards the avenue of limes.

"She shan't get to the bridge before me," she panted. "She shan't, she shan't. I won't let her. Oh, if my breath will only hold out!"

She did not reflect that gardeners would naturally think she had gone mad. She thought of nothing whatever but the look in Ameerah's downcast

eyes when the servants had talked of the bottomless water,--the eerie, satisfied, sly look. Of that, and of the rising of the white figure from the ground last night she thought, and she clutched her neat side as she ran.

The Lime Avenue seemed a mile long, and yet when she was running down it she saw Lady Walderhurst walking slowly under the trees carrying her touching little basket of sewing in her hand. She was close to the bridge.

"My lady! my lady!" she gasped out as soon as she dared. She could not run screaming all the way. "Oh, my lady! if you please!"

Emily heard her and turned round. Never had she been much more amazed in her life. Her maid, her well-bred Jane Cupp, who had not drawn an indecorous breath since assuming her duties, was running after her calling out to her, waving her hands, her face distorted, her voice hysteric.

Emily had been just on the point of stepping on to the bridge, her hand had been outstretched towards the rail. She drew back a step in alarm and stood staring. How strange everything seemed to-day. She began to feel choked and trembling.

A few seconds and Jane was upon her, clutching at her dress. She had so

lost her breath that she was almost speechless.

"My lady," she panted. "Don't set foot on it; don't--don't, till we're sure."

"On--on what?"

Then Jane realised how mad she looked, how insane the whole scene was, and she gave way to her emotions. Partly through physical exhaustion and breathlessness, and partly through helpless terror, she fell on her knees.

"The bridge!" she said. "I don't care what happens to me so that no harm comes to you. There's things being plotted and planned that looks like accidents. The bridge would look like an accident if part of it broke. There's no bottom to the water. They were saying so yesterday, and she sat listening. I found her here last night."

"She! Her!" Emily felt as if she was passing through another nightmare.

"Ameerah," wailed poor Jane. "White ones have no chance against black. Oh, my lady!" her sense of the possibility that she might be making a fool of herself after all was nearly killing her. "I believe she would drive you to your death if she could do it, think what you will of me."

The little basket of needlework shook in Lady Walderhurst's hand. She

swallowed hard, and without warning sat down on the roots of a fallen tree, her cheeks blanching slowly.

"Oh Jane!" she said in simple woe and bewilderment. "I don't understand any of it. How could--how could they want to hurt me!" Her innocence was so fatuous that she thought that because she had been kind to them they could not hate or wish to injure her.

But something for the first time made her begin to quail. She sat, and tried to recover herself. She put out a shaking hand to the basket of sewing. She could scarcely see it, because suddenly tears had filled her eyes.

"Bring one of the men here," she said, after a few moments. "Tell him that I am a little uncertain about the safety of the bridge."

She sat quite still while Jane was absent in search of the man. She held her basket on her knee, her hand resting on it. Her kindly, slow-working mind was wakening to strange thoughts. To her they seemed inhuman and uncanny. Was it because good, faithful, ignorant Jane had been rather nervous about Ameerah that she herself had of late got into a habit of feeling as if the Ayah was watching and following her. She had been startled more than once by finding her near when she had not been aware of her presence. She had, of course, heard Hester say that native servants often startled one by their silent, stealthy-seeming ways. But the woman's eyes had frightened her. And she had heard the story about

the village girl.

She sat, and thought, and thought. Her eyes were fixed upon the moss-covered ground, and her breath came quickly and irregularly several times.

"I don't know what to do," she said. "I am sure--if it is true--I don't know what to do."

The under-gardener's heavy step and Jane's lighter one roused her. She lifted her eyes to watch the pair as they came. He was a big, young man with a simple rustic face and big shoulders and hands.

"The bridge is so slight and old," she said to him, "that it has just occurred to me that it might not be quite safe. Examine it carefully to make sure."

The young man touched his forehead and began to look the supports over. Jane watched him with bated breath when he rose to his feet.

"They're all right on this side, my lady," he said. "I shall have to get in the boat to make sure of them that rest on the island."

He stamped upon the end nearest and it remained firm.

"Look at the railing well," said Lady Walderhurst. "I often stand and

lean on it and--and watch the sunset."

She faltered at this point, because she had suddenly remembered that this was a habit of hers, and that she had often spoken of it to the Osborns. There was a point on the bridge at which, through a gap in the trees, a beautiful sunset was always particularly beautiful. It was the right-hand rail facing these special trees she rested on when she watched the evening sky.

The big, young gardener looked at the left-hand rail and shook it with his strong hands.

"That's safe enough," he said to Jane.

"Try the other," said Jane.

He tried the other. Something had happened to it. It broke in his big grasp. His sunburnt skin changed colour by at least three shades.

"Lord A'mighty!" Jane heard him gasp under his breath. He touched his cap and looked blankly at Lady Walderhurst. Jane's heart seemed to herself to roll over. She scarcely dared look at her mistress, but when she took courage to do so, she found her so white that she hurried to her side.

"Thank you, Jane," she said rather faintly. "The sky is so lovely this

afternoon that I meant to stop and look at it. I should have fallen into the water, which they say has no bottom. No one would have seen or heard me if you had not come."

She caught Jane's hand and held it hard. Her eyes wandered over the avenue of big trees, which no one but herself came near at this hour. It would have been so lonely, so lonely!

The gardener went away, still looking less ruddy than he had looked when he arrived on the spot. Lady Walderhurst rose from her seat on the mossy tree-trunk. She rose quite slowly.

"Don't speak to me yet, Jane," she said. And with Jane following her at a respectful distance, she returned to the house and went to her room to lie down.

There was nothing to prove that the whole thing was not mere chance, mere chance. It was this which turned her cold. It was all impossible. The little bridge had been entirely unused for so long a time, it had been so slight a structure from the first; it was old, and she remembered now that Walderhurst had once said that it must be examined and strengthened if it was to be used. She had leaned upon the rail often lately; one evening she had wondered if it seemed quite as steady as usual. What could she say, whom could she accuse, because a piece of rotten wood had given away.

She started on her pillow. It was a piece of rotten wood which had fallen from the balustrade upon the stairs, to be seen and picked up by Jane just before she would have passed down on her way to dinner. And yet, what would she appear to her husband, to Lady Maria, to anyone in the decorous world, if she told them that she believed that in a dignified English household, an English gentleman, even a deposed heir presumptive, was working out a subtle plot against her such as might adorn a melodrama? She held her head in her hands as her mind depicted to her Lord Walderhurst's countenance, Lady Maria's dubious, amused smile.

"She would think I was hysterical," she cried, under her breath. "He would think I was vulgar and stupid, that I was a fussy woman with foolish ideas, which made him ridiculous. Captain Os-born is of his family. I should be accusing him of being a criminal. And yet I might have been in the bottomless pond, in the bottomless pond, and no one would have known."

If it all had not seemed so incredible to her, if she could have felt certain herself, she would not have been overwhelmed with this sense of being baffled, bewildered, lost.

The Ayah who so loved Hester might hate her rival. A jealous native woman might be capable of playing stealthy tricks, which, to her strange mind, might seem to serve a proper end. Captain Osborn might not know. She breathed again as this thought came to her. He could not know; it

would be too insane, too dangerous, too wicked.

And yet, if she had been flung headlong down the staircase, if the fall had killed her, where would have been the danger for the man who would only have deplored a fatal accident. If she had leaned upon the rail and fallen into the black depths of water below, what could have been blamed but a piece of rotten wood. She touched her forehead with her handkerchief because it felt cold and damp. There was no way out. Her teeth chattered.

"They may be as innocent as I am. And they may be murderers in their hearts. I can prove nothing, I can prevent nothing. Oh! do come home."

There was but one thought which remained clear in her mind. She must keep herself safe--she must keep herself safe. In the anguish of her trouble she confessed, by putting it into words, a thing which she had not confessed before, and even as she spoke she did not realise that her words contained confession.

"If I were to die now," she said with a touching gravity, "he would care very much."

A few moments later she said, "It does not matter what happens to me, how ridiculous or vulgar or foolish I seem, if I can keep myself safe--until after. I will write to him now and ask him to try to come back."

It was the letter she wrote after this decision which Osborn saw among others awaiting postal, and which he stopped to examine.