

Chapter Eighteen

Hester sat at the open window of her boudoir in the dark. She had herself put out the wax candles, because she wanted to feel herself surrounded by the soft blackness. She had sat through the dinner and heard her husband's anxious inquiries about the rotten handrail, and had watched his disturbed face and Emily's pale one. She herself had said but little, and had been glad when the time came that she could decently excuse herself and come away.

As she sat in the darkness and felt the night breath of the flowers in the garden, she was thinking of all the murderers she had ever heard of. She was reflecting that some of them had been quite respectable people, and that all of them must have lived through a period in which they gradually changed from respectable people to persons in whose brains a thought had worked which once they would have believed impossible to them, which they might have scouted the idea of their giving room to. She was sure the change must come about slowly. At first it would seem too mad and ridiculous, a sort of angry joke. Then the angry joke would return again and again, until at last they let it stay and did not laugh at it, but thought it over. Such things always happened because some one wanted, or did not want, something very much, something it drove them mad to think of being forced to live without, or with. Men who hated a woman and could not rid themselves of her, who hated the sight of her face, her eyes, her hair, the sound of her voice and step, and were

rendered insane by her nearness and the thought that they never could be free from any of these things, had before now, commonplace or comparatively agreeable men, by degrees reached the point where a knife or a shot or a heavy blow seemed not only possible but inevitable.

People who had been ill-treated, people who had faced horrors through want and desire, had reached the moment in which they took by force what Fate would not grant them. Her brain so whirled that she wondered if she was not a little delirious as she sat in the stillness thinking such strange things.

For weeks she had been living under a strain so intense that her feelings had seemed to cease to have any connection with what was normal.

She had known too much; and yet she had been certain of nothing at all.

But she and Alec were like the people who began with a bad joke, and then were driven and driven. It was impossible not to think of what might come, and of what might be lost for ever. If the rail had not been tried this afternoon, if big, foolish Emily Walderhurst had been lying peacefully among the weeds to-night!

"The end comes to everyone," she said. "It would have been all over in a few minutes. They say it isn't really painful."

Her lips quivered, and she pressed her hands tightly between her knees.

"That's a murderer's thought," she muttered querulously. "And yet I wasn't a bad girl to begin with."

She began to see things. The chief thing was a sort of vision of how Emily would have looked lying in the depths of the water among the weeds. Her brown hair would have broken loose, and perhaps tangled itself over her white face. Would her eyes be open and glazed, or half shut? And her childish smile, the smile that looked so odd on the face of a full-grown woman, would it have been fixed and seemed to confront the world of life with a meek question as to what she had done to people--why she had been drowned? Hester felt sure that was what her helpless stillness would have expressed.

How happy the woman had been! To see her go about with her unconsciously

joyous eyes had sometimes been maddening. And yet, poor thing! why had she not the right to be happy? She was always trying to please people and help them. She was so good that she was almost silly. The day she had brought the little things from London to The Kennel Farm, Hester remembered that, despite her own morbid resentment, she had ended by kissing her with repentant tears. She heard again, in the midst of her delirious thoughts, the nice, prosaic emotion of her voice as she said:

"Don't thank me--don't. Just let us enjoy ourselves."

And she might have been lying among the long, thick weeds of the pond. And it would not have been the accident it would have appeared to be. Of that she felt sure. Brought face to face with this definiteness of situation, she began to shudder.

She went out into the night feeling that she wanted air. She was not strong enough to stand the realisation that she had become part of a web into which she had not meant to be knitted. No; she had had her passionate and desperate moments, but she had not meant things like this. She had almost hoped that disaster might befall, she had almost thought it possible that she would do nothing to prevent it--almost. But some things were too bad.

She felt small and young and hopelessly evil as she walked in the dark along a grass path to a seat under a tree. The very stillness of the night was a horror to her, especially when once an owl called, and again a dreaming bird cried in its nest.

She sat under the tree in the dark for at least an hour. The thick shadow of the drooping branches hid her in actual blackness and seclusion.

She said to herself later that some one of the occult powers she believed in had made her go out and sit in this particular spot, because there was a thing which was not to be, and she herself must come between.

When she at last rose it was with panting breath. She stole back to her room, and lighted with an unsteady hand a bedroom candle, whose flame flickered upon a distorted, little dark face. For as she had sat under the tree she had, after a while, heard whispering begin quite near her; had caught, even in the darkness, a gleam of white, and had therefore deliberately sat and listened.

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There could be, to the purely normal geniality of Emily Walderhurst's nature, no greater relief than the recognition that a cloud had passed from the mood of another.

When Hester appeared the next morning at the breakfast-table, she had emerged from her humour of the day before and was almost affectionate in her amiability. The meal at an end, she walked with Emily in the garden.

She had never shown such interest in what pertained to her as she revealed this morning. Something she had always before lacked Emily recognised in her for the first time,--a desire to ask friendly questions, to verge on the confidential. They talked long and without reserve. And how pretty it was of the girl, Emily thought, to care so much about her health and her spirits, to be so interested in the details of her every-day life, even in the simple matter of the preparation and serving of her food, as if the merest trifle was of

consequence. It had been unfair, too, to fancy that she felt no interest in Walderhurst's absence and return. She had noticed everything closely, and actually thought he ought to come back at once.

"Send for him," she said quite suddenly; "send for him now."

There was an eagerness expressed in the dark thinness of her face which moved Emily.

"It is dear of you to care so much, Hester," she said. "I didn't know you thought it mattered."

"He must come," said Hester. "That's all. Send for him."

"I wrote a letter yesterday," was Lady Walderhurst's meek rejoinder. "I got nervous."

"So did I get nervous," said Hester; "so did I."

That she was disturbed Emily could see. The little laugh she ended her words with had an excited ring in it.

During the Osborns' stay at Palstrey the two women had naturally seen a good deal of each other, but for the next two days they were scarcely separated at all. Emily, feeling merely cheered and supported by the fact that Hester made herself so excellent a companion, was not aware of

two or three things. One was that Mrs. Osborn did not lose sight of her unless at such times as she was in the hands of Jane Cupp.

"I may as well make a clean breast of it," the young woman said. "I have a sense of responsibility about you that I haven't liked to speak of before. It's half hysterical, I suppose, but it has got the better of me."

"You feel responsible for me!" exclaimed Emily, with wondering eyes.

"Yes, I do," she almost snapped. "You represent so much. Walderhurst ought to be here. I'm not fit to take care of you."

"I ought to be taking care of you," said Emily, with gentle gravity. "I am the older and stronger. You are not nearly so well as I am."

Hester startled her by bursting into tears.

"Then do as I tell you," she said. "Don't go anywhere alone. Take Jane Cupp with you. You have nearly had two accidents. Make Jane sleep in your dressing-room."

Emily felt a dreary chill creep over her. That which she had felt in the air when she had slowly turned an amazed face upon Jane in the Lime Avenue, that sense of the strangeness of things again closed her in.

"I will do as you wish," she answered.

But before the next day closed all was made plain to her, all the awfulness, all the cruel, inhuman truth of things which seemed to lose their possibility in the exaggeration of proportion which made their incongruousness almost grotesque.

The very prettiness of the flowered boudoir, the very softness of the peace in the velvet spread of garden before the windows, made it even more unreal.

That day, the second one, Emily had begun to note the new thing. Hester was watching her, Hester was keeping guard. And as she realised this, the sense of the abnormalness of things grew, and fear grew with it. She began to feel as if a wall were rising around her, built by unseen hands.

The afternoon, an afternoon of deeply golden sun, they had spent together. They had read and talked. Hester had said most. She had told stories of India,--curious, vivid, interesting stories, which seemed to excite her.

At the time when the sunlight took its deepest gold the tea-tray was brought in. Hester had left the room a short time before the footman appeared with it, carrying it with the air of disproportionate solemnity with which certain male domestics are able to surround the smallest

service. The tea had been frequently served in Hester's boudoir of late. During the last week, however, Lady Walderhurst's share of the meal had been a glass of milk. She had chosen to take it because Mrs. Cupp had suggested that tea was "nervous." Emily sat down at the table and filled a cup for Hester. She knew she would return in a few moments, so set the cup before Mrs. Osborn's place and waited. She heard the young woman's footsteps outside, and as the door opened she lifted the glass of milk to her lips.

She was afterwards absolutely unable to describe to herself clearly what happened the next moment. In fact, it was the next moment that she saw Hester spring towards her, and the glass of milk had been knocked from her hand and rolled, emptying itself, upon the floor. Mrs. Osborn stood before her, clenching and unclenching her hands.

"Have you drunk any of it?" she demanded.

"No," Emily answered. "I have not."

Hester Osborn dropped into a chair and leaned forward, covering her face with her hands. She looked like a woman on the verge of an outbreak of hysteria, only to be held in check by a frenzied effort.

Lady Walderhurst, quite slowly, turned the colour of the milk itself. But she did nothing but sit still and gaze at Hester.

"Wait a minute." The girl was trying to recover her breath. "Wait till I can hold myself still. I am going to tell you now. I am going to tell you."

"Yes," Emily answered faintly.

It seemed to her that she waited twenty minutes before another word was spoken, that she sat quite that long looking at the thin hands which seemed to clutch the hidden face. This was a mistake arising from the intensity of the strain upon her nerves. It was scarcely five minutes before Mrs. Osborn lowered her hands and laid them, pressed tightly palm to palm, between her knees.

She spoke in a low voice, such a voice as a listener outside could not have heard.

"Do you know," she demanded, "what you represent to us--to me and to my husband--as you sit there?"

Emily shook her head. The movement of disclaimer was easier than speech. She felt a sort of exhaustion.

"I don't believe you do," said Hester. "You don't seem to realise anything. Perhaps it's because you are so innocent, perhaps it's because you are so foolish. You represent the thing that we have the right to hate most on earth."

"Do you hate me?" asked Emily, trying to adjust herself mentally to the mad extraordinariness of the situation, and at the same time scarcely understanding why she asked her question.

"Sometimes I do. When I do not I wonder at myself." The girl paused a second, looked down, as if questioningly, at the carpet, and then, lifting her eyes again, went on in a dragging, half bewildered voice: "When I do not, I actually believe it is because we are both--women together. Before, it was different."

The look which Walderhurst had compared to "that of some nice animal in the Zoo" came into Emily's eyes as two honest drops fell from them.

"Would you hurt me?" she faltered. "Could you let other people hurt me?"

Hester leaned further forward in her chair, widening upon her such hysterically insistent, terrible young eyes as made her shudder.

"Don't you see?" she cried. "Can't you see? But for you my son would be what Walderhurst is--my son, not yours."

"I understand," said Emily. "I understand."

"Listen!" Mrs. Osborn went on through her teeth. "Even for that, there

are things I haven't the nerve to stand. I have thought I could stand them. But I can't. It does not matter why. I am going to tell you the truth. You represent too much. You have been too great a temptation. Nobody meant anything or planned anything at first. It all came by degrees. To see you smiling and enjoying everything and adoring that stilted prig of a Walderhurst put ideas into people's heads, and they grew because every chance fed them. If Walderhurst would come home--"

Lady Walderhurst put out her hand to a letter which lay on the table.

"I heard from him this morning," she said. "And he has been sent to the Hills because he has a little fever. He must be quiet. So you see he cannot come yet."

She was shivering, though she was determined to keep still.

"What was in the milk?" she asked.

"In the milk there was the Indian root Ameerah gave the village girl. Last night as I sat under a tree in the dark I heard it talked over. Only a few native women know it."

There was a singular gravity in the words poor Lady Walderhurst spoke in reply.

"That," she said, "would have been the cruelest thing of all."

Mrs. Osborn got up and came close to her.

"If you had gone out on Faustine," she said, "you would have met with an accident. It might or might not have killed you. But it would have been an accident. If you had gone downstairs before Jane Cupp saw the bit of broken balustrade you might have been killed--by accident again. If you had leaned upon the rail of the bridge you would have been drowned, and no human being could have been accused or blamed."

Emily gasped for breath, and lifted her head as if to raise it above the wall which was being slowly built round her.

"Nothing will be done which can be proved," said Hester Osborn. "I have lived among native people, and know. If Ameerah hated me and I could not get rid of her I should die, and it would all seem quite natural."

She bent down and picked up the empty glass from the carpet.

"It is a good thing it did not break," she said, as she put it on the tray. "Ameerah will think you drank the milk and that nothing will hurt you. You escape them always. She will be frightened."

As she said it she began to cry a little, like a child.

"Nothing will save me," she said. "I shall have to go back, I shall

have to go back!"

"No, no!" cried Emily.

The girl swept away her tears with the back of a clenched hand.

"At first, when I hated you," she was even petulant and plaintively resentful, "I thought I could let it go on. I watched, and watched, and bore it. But the strain was too great. I broke down. I think I broke down one night, when something began to beat like a pulse against my side."

Emily got up and stood before her. She looked perhaps rather as she had looked when she rose and stood before the Marquis of Walderhurst on a memorable occasion, the afternoon on the moor. She felt almost quiet, and safe.

"What must I do?" she asked, as if she was speaking to a friend. "I am afraid. Tell me."

Little Mrs. Osborn stood still and stared at her. The most incongruous thought came to her mind. She found herself, at this weird moment, observing how well the woman held her stupid head, how finely it was set on her shoulders, and that in a modern Royal Academy way she was rather like the Venus of Milo. It is quite out of place to think such things at such a time. But she found herself confronted with them.

"Go away," she answered. "It is all like a thing in a play, but I know what I am talking about. Say you are ordered abroad. Be cool and matter-of-fact. Simply go and hide yourself somewhere, and call your husband home as soon as he can travel."

Emily Walderhurst passed her hand over her forehead.

"It is like something in a play," she said, with a baffled, wondering face. "It isn't even respectable."

Hester began to laugh.

"No, it isn't even respectable," she cried. And her laughter was just in time. The door opened and Alec Osborn came in.

"What isn't respectable?" he asked.

"Something I have been telling Emily," she answered, laughing even a trifle wildly. "You are too young to hear such things. You must be kept respectable at any cost."

He grinned, but faintly scowled at the same time.

"You've upset something," he remarked, looking at the carpet.

"I have, indeed," said Hester. "A cup of tea which was half milk. It will leave a grease spot on the carpet. That won't be respectable."

When she had tumbled about among native servants as a child, she had learned to lie quickly, and she was very ready of resource.

Chapter Nineteen

As she heard the brougham draw up in the wet street before the door, Mrs. Warren allowed her book to fall closed upon her lap, and her attractive face awakened to an expression of agreeable expectation, in itself denoting the existence of interesting and desirable qualities in the husband at the moment inserting his latch-key in the front door preparatory to mounting the stairs and joining her. The man who, after twenty-five years of marriage, can call, by his return to her side, this expression to the countenance of an intelligent woman is, without question or argument, an individual whose life and occupations are as interesting as his character and points of view.

Dr. Warren was of the mental build of the man whose life would be interesting and full of outlook if it were spent on a desert island or in the Bastille. He possessed the temperament which annexes incident and adventure, and the perceptiveness of imagination which turns a light upon the merest fragment of event. As a man whose days were filled with