

"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

the work attendant upon the exercise of a profession from which can be withheld few secrets, and to which most mysteries explain themselves, his brain was the recording machine of impressions which might have stimulated to vividness of imagination a man duller than himself, and roused to feeling one of far less warm emotions.

He came into the room smiling. He was a man of fifty, of strong build, and masculine. He had good shoulders and good colour, and the eyes, nose, and chin of a man it would be a stupid thing to attempt to deal with in a blackguardly manner. He sat down in his chair by the fire and began to chat, as was his habit before he and his wife parted to dress for dinner. When he was out during the day he often looked forward to these chats, and made notes of things he would like to tell his Mary. During her day, which was given to feminine duties and pleasures, she frequently did the same thing. Between seven and eight in the evening they had delightful conversational opportunities. He picked up her book and glanced it over, he asked her a few questions and answered a few; but she saw it was with a somewhat preoccupied manner. She knew a certain remote look in his eye, and she waited to see him get up from his chair and begin to walk to and fro, with his hands in his pockets and his head thrown back. When, after having done this, he began in addition to whistle softly and draw his eyebrows together, she broke in upon him in the manner of merely following an established custom.

"I am perfectly sure," was her remark, "that you have come upon one of the Extraordinary Cases."

The last two words were spoken as with inverted commas. Of many deep interests he added to her existence, the Extraordinary Cases were among the most absorbing. He had begun to discuss them with her during the first year of their married life. Accident had thrown one of them into her immediate personal experience, and her clear-headed comprehension and sympathy in summing up singular evidence had been of such value to him that he had turned to her in the occurrence of others for the aid straightforward, mutual logic could give. She had learned to await the Extraordinary Case with something like eagerness. Sometimes, it was true, its incidents were painful; but invariably they were absorbing in their interest, and occasionally illuminating beyond description. Of names and persons it was not necessary she should hear anything--the drama, the ethics, were enough. With an absolute respect for his professional reserves, she asked no questions he could not reply to freely, and avoided even the innocent following of clues. The Extraordinary Case was always quite enough as it stood. When she saw the remotely speculative look in his eye, she suspected one, when he left his chair and paced the floor with that little air of restlessness, and ended with unconscious whistling which was scarcely louder than a breath, she felt that evidence enough had accumulated for her.

He stopped and turned round.

"My good Mary," he owned at once, "its extraordinariness consists in its baffling me by being so perfectly ordinary."

"Well, at least that is not frequent. What is its nature? Is it awful? Is it sad? Is it eccentric? Is it mad or sane, criminal or domestic?"

"It is nothing but suggestive, and that it suggests mystery to me makes me feel as if I myself, instead of a serious practitioner, am a professional detective."

"Is it a case in which you might need help?"

"It is a case in which I am impelled to give help, if it proves that it is necessary. She is such an exceedingly nice woman."

"Good, bad, or indifferent?"

"Of a goodness, I should say--of a goodness which might prevent the brain acting in the manner in which a brutal world requires at present that the human brain should act in self-defence. Of a goodness which may possibly have betrayed her into the most pathetic trouble."

"Of the kind--?" was Mrs. Warren's suggestion.

"Of that kind," with a troubled look; "but she is a married woman."

"She says she is a married woman."

"No. She does not say so, but she looks it. That's the chief feature of the case. Any woman bearing more obviously the stamp of respectable British matrimony than this one does, it has not fallen to me to look upon."

Mrs. Warren's expression was *intriguée* in the extreme. There was a freshness in this, at least.

"But if she bears the stamp as well as the name--! Do tell me all it is possible to tell. Come and sit down, Harold."

He sat down and entered into details.

"I was called to a lady who, though not ill, seemed fatigued from a hurried journey and, as it seemed to me, the effects of anxiety and repressed excitement. I found her in a third-class lodging-house in a third-class street. It was a house which had the air of a place hastily made inhabitable for some special reason. There were evidences that money had been spent, but that there had been no time to arrange things. I have seen something of the kind before, and when I was handed into my patient's sitting-room, thought I knew the type I should find. It is always more or less the same,--a girl or a very young woman, pretty and refined and frightened, or pretty and vulgar and 'carrying it off' with transparent pretences and airs and graces. Anything more remote from what I expected you absolutely cannot conceive."

"Not young and pretty?"

"About thirty-five or six. A fresh, finely built woman with eyes as candid as a six-year-old girl's. Quite unexplanatory and with the best possible manner, only sweetly anxious about her health. Her confidence in my advice and the earnestness of her desire to obey my least instructions were moving. Ten minutes' conversation with her revealed to me depths of long-secreted romance in my nature. I mentally began to swear fealty to her."

"Did she tell you that her husband was away?"

"What specially struck me was that it did not occur to her that her husband required stating, which was ingenuously impressive. She did not explain her mother or her uncles, why her husband? Her mental attitude had a translucent clearness. She wanted a medical man to take charge of her, and if she had been an amiable, un-brilliant lady who was a member of the royal house, she would have conversed with me exactly as she did."

"She was so respectable?"

"She was even a little Mid-Victorian, dear Mary; a sort of clean, healthy, Mid-Victorian angel."

"There's an incongruousness in the figure in connection with being

obviously in hiding in a lodging-house street." And Mrs. Warren gave herself to reflection.

"I cannot make it as incongruous as she was. I have not told you all. I have saved to the last the feature which marked her most definitely as an Extraordinary Case. I suppose one does that sort of thing from a sense of drama."

"What else?" inquired Mrs. Warren, roused from her speculation.

"What respectable conclusion could one deduce from the fact that a letter lay on the table near her, sealed with an imposing coat of arms. One's eye having accidentally fallen on it, one could, of course, only avoid glancing at it again, so I recognised nothing definite. Also, when I was announced unexpectedly, I saw her quickly withdraw her hand from her lips. She had been kissing a ring she wore. I could not help seeing that afterwards. My good Mary, it was a ruby, of a size and colour which recalled the Arabian Nights."

Mrs. Warren began to resign herself.

"No," she said, "there is no respectable conclusion to be drawn. It is tragic, but prosaic. She has been governess or companion in some great house. She may be a well-born woman. It is ten times more hideous for her than if she were a girl. She has to writhe under knowing that both her friends and her enemies are saying that she had not the excuse of

not having been old enough to know better."

"That might all be true," he admitted promptly. "It would be true if--but she is not writhing. She is no more unhappy than you or I. She is only anxious, and I could swear that she is only anxious about one thing. The moment in which I swore fealty to her was when she said to me, 'I want to be quite safe--until after. I do not care for myself. I will bear anything or do anything. Only one thing matters. I shall be such a good patient.' Then her eyes grew moist, and she closed her lips decorously to keep them from trembling.

"They're not usually like that," Mrs. Warren remarked.

"I have not found them so," he replied.

"Perhaps she believes the man will marry her."

There was odd unexpectedness in the manner in which Dr. Warren suddenly began to laugh.

"My dear wife, if you could see her! It is the incongruity of what we are saying which makes me laugh. With her ruby and her coronets and her lodging-house street, she is of an impeccableness! She does not even know she could be doubted. Fifteen years of matrimony spent in South Kensington, three girls in the schoolroom and four boys at Eton, could not have crystallised a more unquestionable serenity. And you are saying



gravely, 'Perhaps she believes the man will marry her.' Whatsoever the situation is, I am absolutely sure that she has never asked herself whether he would or not."

"Then," Mrs. Warren answered, "it is the most Extraordinary Case we have had yet."

"But I have sworn fealty to her," was Warren's conclusion. "And she will tell me more later." He shook his head with an air of certainty. "Yes, she will feel it necessary to tell me later."

They went upstairs to dress for dinner, and during the remainder of the evening which they spent alone they talked almost entirely of the matter.