

Chapter Twenty One

Naturally a perceptive and closely reasoning woman, Mrs. Warren's close intellectual intimacy with her husband had, in giving her the benefit of intercourse with a wide experience, added greatly to her power of reasoning by deduction. Warren frequently felt that his talk with her was something like consultation with a specially clever and sympathetic professional confrère. Her suggestions or conclusions were invariably worth consideration. More than once his reflection upon them had led him to excellent results. She made one night a suggestion with regard to the Extraordinary Case which struck him as being more than usually astute.

"Is she an intellectual woman?" she inquired.

"Not in the least. An unsparingly brilliant person might feel himself entitled to the right to call her stupid."

"Is she talkative?"

"Far from it. One of her charms is the nice respect she seems to feel for the remarks of others."

"And she is not excitable?"

"Rather the reverse. If excitability is liveliness, she is dull."

"I see," slowly, "you have not yet thought it possible that she might--well--be under some delusion."

Warren turned quickly and looked at her.

"It is wonderfully brilliant of you to have thought of it. A delusion?"

He stood and thought it over.

"Do you remember," his wife assisted him with, "the complications which arose from young Mrs. Jerrold's running away, under similar circumstances, to Scotland and hiding herself in a shepherd's cottage under the impression that her husband was shadowing her with detectives? You recollect what a lovable woman she was, and what horror she felt of the poor fellow."

"Yes, yes. That was an Extraordinary Case too."

Mrs. Warren warmed with her subject.

"Here is a woman obviously concealing herself from the world in a lodging-house, plainly possessing money, owning a huge ruby ring, receiving documents stamped with imposing seals, taking exercise only by night, heart-wrung over the non-arrival of letters which are due. Every detail points to one painful, dubious situation. On the other hand, she presents to you the manner and aspect of a woman who is absolutely not

dubious, and who is merely anxious on the one point a dubious person would be indifferent to. Isn't it, then, possible that over-wrought physical condition may have driven her to the belief that she is hiding from danger."

Dr. Warren was evidently following the thought seriously.

"She said," reflecting, "that all that mattered was that she should be safe. 'I want to keep safe.' That was it. You are very enlightening, Mary, always. I will go and see her again to-morrow. But," as the result of another memory, "how sane she seems!"

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He was thinking of this possible aspect of the matter as he mounted the staircase of the house in Mortimer Street the next day. The stairway was of the ordinary lodging-house type, its dinginess somewhat alleviated by the fact that the Cupps had covered the worn carpet with clean warm-coloured felting. The yellowish marbled paper on the walls depressed the mind as one passed it; the indeterminate dun paint had defied fog for years. The whole house presented only such features as would encourage its proprietors to trust to the sufficing of infrequent re-decoration.

Jane had, however, made efforts in behalf of the drawing-room, in which her mistress spent her days. She had introduced palliations by degrees

and with an unobtrusiveness which was not likely to attract the attention of neighbours unaccustomed to lavish delivery by means of furniture vans. She had brought in a rug or so, and had gradually replaced objects with such as were more pleasant to live with and more comfortable to use. Dr. Warren had seen the change wrought, and had noted evidences that money was not unobtainable. The maid also was a young woman whose manner towards her mistress was not merely respectful and well-bred, but suggestive of watchful affection bordering on reverence. Jane Cupp herself was a certificate of decorum and good standing. It was not such young women who secluded themselves with questionable situations. As she laid her hand on the drawing-room door to open it and announce him, it occurred to Dr. Warren that he would tell Mary that evening that if Mrs. Jameson had been the heroine of any unconventional domestic drama it was an unmistakable fact that Jane Cupp would have "felt it her duty as a young woman to leave this day month, if you please, ma'am," quite six months ago. And there she was, in a neat gown and apron,--evidently a fixture because she liked her place,--her decent young face full of sympathetic interest.

The day was dull and cold, but the front room was warm and made cheerful by fire. Mrs. Jameson was sitting at a writing-table. There were letters before her, and she seemed to have been re-reading them. She did not any longer bloom with normal health. Her face was a little dragged, and the first thing he noted in the eyes she lifted to him was that they were bewildered.

"She has had a shock," he thought. "Poor woman!"

He began to talk to her about herself with the kindly perception which was inseparable from him. He wondered if the time had not come when she would confide in him. Her shock, whatsoever it had been, had left her in the position of a woman wholly at a loss to comprehend what had occurred. He saw this in her ingenuous troubled face. He felt as if she was asking herself what she should do. It was not unlikely that presently she would ask him what she should do. He had been asked such things before by women, but they usually added trying detail accompanied by sobs, and appealed to his chivalry for impossible aid. Sometimes they implored him to go to people and use his influence.

Emily answered all his questions with her usual sweet, good sense. She was not well. Yesterday she had fainted.

"Was there any disturbing reason for the faint?" he inquired.

"It was because I was--very much disappointed," she answered, hesitating. "I had a letter which--It was not what I expected."

She was thinking desperately. She could understand nothing. It was not explainable that what she had written did not matter at all, that James should have made no reply.

"I was awake all night," she added.

"That must not go on," he said.

"I was thinking--and thinking," nervously.

"I can see that," was his answer.

Perhaps she ought to have courage to say nothing. It might be safer. But it was so lonely not to dare to ask anyone's advice, that she was getting frightened. India was thousands and thousands of miles away, and letters took so long to come and go. Anxiety might make her ill before she could receive a reply to a second letter. And perhaps now in her terror she had put herself into a ridiculous position. How could she send for Lady Maria to Mortimer Street and explain to her? She realised also that her ladyship's sense of humour might not be a thing to confide in safely.

Warren's strong, amiable personality was good for her. It served to aid her to normal reasoning. Though she was not aware of the fact, her fears, her simplicity, and her timorous adoration of her husband had not allowed her to reason normally in the past. She had been too anxious and too much afraid.

Her visitor watched her with great interest and no little curiosity. He himself saw that her mood was not normal. She did not look as poor Mrs.

Jerrold had looked, but she was not in a normal state.

He made his visit a long one purposely. Tea was brought up, and he drank it with her. He wanted to give her time to make up her mind about him.

When at last he rose to go away, she rose also. She looked nervously undecided, but let him go towards the door.

Her move forward was curiously sudden.

"No, no," she said. "Please come back. I--oh!--I really think I ought to tell you."

He turned towards her, wishing that Mary were with him. She stood trying to smile, and looking so entirely nice and well-behaved even in her agitation.

"If I were not so puzzled, or if there was anybody--" she said. "If you could only advise me; I must--I must keep safe."

"There is something you want to tell me?" he said quietly.

"Yes," she answered. "I am so anxious, and I am sure it must be bad for one to be anxious always. I have not dared to tell anyone. My name is not Mrs. Jameson, Dr. Warren. I am--I am Lady Walderhurst."

He barely managed to restrain a start. He was obliged to admit to

himself that he had not thought of anything like this. But Mary had been right.

Emily blushed to her ears with embarrassment. He did not believe her.

"But I am really," she protested. "I really am. I was married last year. I was Emily Fox-Seton. Perhaps you remember."

She was not flighty or indignant. Her frank face was only a little more troubled than it had been before. She looked straight into his eyes without a doubt of his presently believing her. Good heavens! if--

She walked to the writing-table and picked up a number of letters. They were all stamped with the same seal. She brought them to him almost composedly.

"I ought to have remembered how strange it would sound," she said in her amenable voice. "I hope I am not doing wrong in speaking. I hope you won't mind my troubling you. It seemed as if I couldn't bear it alone any longer."

After which she told him her story.

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The unadorned straightforwardness of the relation made it an amazing

thing to hear, even more amazing than it would have been made by a more imaginative handling. Her obvious inability to cope with the unusual and villainous, combined with her entire willingness to obliterate herself in any manner in her whole-souled tenderness for the one present object of her existence, were things a man could not be unmoved by, even though experience led him to smile at the lack of knowledge of the world which had left her without practical defence. Her very humbleness and candour made her a drama in herself.

"Perhaps I was wrong to run away. Perhaps only a silly woman would have done such a queer, unconventional thing. But I could think of nothing else so likely to be quite safe, until Lord Walderhurst could advise me. And when his letter came yesterday, and he did not speak of what I had said--" Her voice quite failed her.

"Captain Osborn has detained your letter. Lord Walderhurst has not seen it."

Life began to come back to her. She had been so horribly bewildered as to think at moments that perhaps it might be that a man who was very much absorbed in affairs--

"The information you sent him is the most important, and moving, a man in his position could receive."

"Do you think so, really?" She lifted her head with new courage and

her colour returned.

"It is impossible that it should be otherwise. It is, I assure you, impossible, Lady Walderhurst."

"I am so thankful," she said devoutly. "I am so thankful that I have told you."

Anything more touching and attractive than her full eyes and her grown-up child's smile he felt he had never seen.