

Chapter Twenty Two

The attack of fever which had seemed to begin lightly for Lord Walderhurst assumed proportions such as his medical man had not anticipated. His annoyance at finding his duties interfered with fretted him greatly. He was not, under the circumstances, a good patient, and, partly as a result of his state of mind, he began, in the course of a few weeks, to give his doctors rather serious cause for anxiety. On the morning following Emily's confession to Dr. Warren she had received a letter from her husband's physician, notifying her of his new anxieties in connection with his patient. His lordship required extreme care and absolute freedom from all excitement. Everything which medical science and perfect nursing could do would be done. The writer asked Lady Walderhurst's collaboration with him in his efforts at keeping the invalid as far as possible in unperturbed spirits. For some time it seemed probable that letter writing and reading would be out of the question, but if, when correspondence might be resumed, Lady Walderhurst would keep in mind the importance of serenity to the convalescent, the case would have all in its favour. This, combined with expressions of sympathetic encouragement and assurances that the best might be hoped for, was the gist of the letter. When Dr. Warren arrived, Emily handed the epistle to him and watched him as he read it.

"You see," she said when he looked up, "that I did not speak too soon. Now I shall have to trust to you for everything. I could never have

borne it all by myself. Could I?"

"Perhaps not," thinking it over; "but you are very brave."

"I don't think I'm brave," thinking it over on her own part, "but it seemed as if there were things I must do. But now you will advise me."

She was as biddable as a child, he told his wife afterwards, and that a woman of her height and carriage should be as biddable as she might have been at six years old, was an effective thing.

"She will do anything I tell her, she will go anywhere I advise. I advise that she shall go to her husband's house in Berkeley Square, and that together you and I will keep unobtrusive guard over her. All is quite simple, really. All would have been comparatively simple at the outset, if she had felt sure enough of her evidence to dare to confide in some practical person. But she was too uncertain and too much afraid of scandal, which might annoy her husband. She is deeply in awe of Lord Walderhurst and deeply in love with him."

"When one realises how unnecessary qualities and charms seem to be to the awakening of the tender emotion, it is rather dull, perhaps, to ask why. Yet one weakly asks it," was Mrs. Warren's summation.

"And one cannot supply the answer. But the mere devotion itself in this nice creature is a thing to be respected. She will control even her

anxieties and reveal nothing while she writes her cheerful letters, as soon as she is allowed to write them."

"Lord Walderhurst will be told nothing?"

"Nothing until his recovery is complete. Now that she has made a clean breast of everything to me and given herself into my hands, I believe that she finds a sentimental pleasure in the thought of keeping her secret until he returns. I will confess to you, Mary, that I think that she has read of and tenderly sympathised with heroines who have done the like before. She does not pose to herself as a heroine, but she dwells affectionately on ingenuous mental pictures of what Lord Walderhurst will say. It is just as well that it should be so. It is better for her than fretting would be. Experience helped me to gather from the medical man's letter that his patient is in no condition to be told news of any kind, good or bad."

The house in Berkeley Square was reopened. Lady Walderhurst returned to it, as it was understood below stairs, from a visit to some German health resort. Mrs. Cupp and Jane returned with her. The wife of her physician in attendance was with her a great deal. It was most unfortunate for her ladyship that my lord was detained in India by illness.

The great household, having presented opened shutters to the world, went on in the even tenor of its way. There brooded over it, however, a sort

of hushed dignity of atmosphere. The very housemaids wore an air of grave discretion. Their labours assumed the proportions of confidential interested service, in which they felt a private pride. Not one among them had escaped becoming attached to Lady Walderhurst.

Away from Palstreay, away from Mortimer Street, Emily began to find reality in the fact that everything had already become quite simple, after all. The fine rooms looked so well ordered and decent in a stately way. Melodramatic plotting ceased to exist as she looked at certain dignified sofas and impressive candelabra. Such things became even more impossible than they had become before the convincingness of the first floor front bedroom in Mortimer Street, She began to give a good deal of thought to the summer at Mallowe. There was an extraordinary luxury in living again each day of it, the morning when she had taken the third-class carriage which provided her with hot, labouring men in corduroys as companions, that fleeting moment when the tall man with the square face had passed the carriage and looked straight through her without seeming to see her at all. She sat and smiled tenderly at the mere reminiscent thought. And then the glimpse of him as he got into the high phaeton at the station; and the moment when Lady Maria had exclaimed "There's Walderhurst," and he had come swinging with his leisurely step across the lawn. And he had scarcely seemed to see her then, or notice her really when they met, until the morning he had joined her as she gathered the roses and had talked to her about Lady Agatha. But he had actually been noticing her a little even from the first--he had been thinking about her a little all the time. And how far

she had been from guessing it when she had talked to Lady Agatha, how pleased she had been the morning of the rose gathering when he had seemed interested only in Agatha's self! She always liked to recall, however, the way in which he had asked the few questions about her own affairs. Her simplicity never wearied of the fascination of the way in which he had looked at her, standing on the pathway, with that delightful non-committal fixing of her with the monocle when she had said:

"People are kind. You see, I have nothing to give, and I always seem to be receiving."

And he had gazed at her quite unmovedly and answered only:

"What luck!"

But since then he had mentioned this moment as one of those in which he had felt that he might want to marry her, because she was so unconscious of the fact that she gave much more to everybody than she received, that she had so much to give and was totally unaware of the value of her gifts.

"His thoughts of me are so beautiful very often," was her favourite reflection, "though he always has that composed way of saying things. What he says seems more valuable, because he is like that."

In truth, his composed way of saying things it was which seemed to her incomparable. Even when, without understanding its own longing for a thing it lacked, her heart had felt itself a little unsustained she had never ceased to feel the fascination of his entire freedom from any shadow of interest in the mental attitude of others towards himself. When he stood and gazed at people through the glass neatly screwed into his eye, one felt that it was he whose opinion was of importance, not the other person's. Through sheer chill imperviousness he seemed entirely detached from the powers of criticism. What people said or thought of his fixed opinion on a subject was not of the least consequence, in fact did not exist; the entities of the persons who cavilled at such opinions themselves ceased to exist, so far as he was concerned. His was the immovable temperament. He did not snub people: he cut the cord of mental communication with them and dropped them into space. Emily thought this firmness and reserved dignity, and quailed before the thought of erring in such a manner as would cause him to so send her soul adrift. Her greatest terror during the past months had been the fear of making him ridiculous, of putting him in some position which might annoy him by objectionable publicity.

But now she had no further fears, and could wait in safety and dwell in peace upon her memories and her hopes. She even began to gain a kind of courage in her thoughts of him.

The atmosphere of the Berkeley Square mansion was good for her. She had never felt so much its mistress before the staff of servants of whose

existence she was the centre, who so plainly served her with careful pleasure, who considered her least wish or inclination as a royal command, increased her realisation of her security and power. The Warrens, who understood the dignity and meaning of mere worldly facts her nature did not grasp, added subtly to her support. Gradually she learned to reveal herself in simple talk to Mrs. Warren, who found her, when so revealed, a case more extraordinary than she had been when enshrouded in dubious mystery.

"She is absolutely delicious," Mrs. Warren said to her husband. "That an adoration such as hers could exist in the nineteenth century is--"

"Almost degenerate," he laughed.

"Perhaps it is regenerate," reflecting. "Who knows! Nothing earthly, or heavenly, would induce me to cast a doubt upon it. Seated opposite to a portrait of her James, I hear her opinions of him, when she is not in the least aware of what her simplest observation conveys. She does not know that she is including him when she is talking of other things, that one sees that while she is too shy to openly use his name much, the very breath of her life is a reference to him. Her greatest bliss at present is to go unobtrusively into his special rooms and sit there dwelling upon his goodness to her."

In fact Emily spent many a quiet hour in the apartments she had visited on the day of her farewell to her husband. She was very happy there. Her

soul was uplifted by her gratitude for the peace she had reached. The reports of Lord Walderhurst's physician were never alarming and generally of a reassuring nature. But she knew that he must exercise great caution, and that time must elapse before he could confront his return voyage. He would come back as soon as was quite safe. And in the meantime her world held all that she could desire, lacking himself.

Her emotion expressed itself in her earnest performance of her reverent daily devotions. She read many chapters of the Bible, and often sat happily absorbed in the study of her Book of Common Prayer. She found solace and happiness in such things, and spent her Sunday mornings, after the ringing of the church bells, quite alone in Walderhurst's study, following the Service and reading the Collects and Lessons. The room used to seem so beautifully still, even Berkeley Square wearing its church-hour aspect suggested devout aloofness from worldly things.

"I sit at the window and think," she explained to Mrs. Warren. "It is so nice there."

She wrote her letters to India in this room. She did not know how far the new courage in her thoughts of her husband expressed itself in these letters. When Walderhurst read them, however, he felt a sense of change in her. Women were sometimes spoken of as "coming out amazingly." He began to feel that Emily was, in a measure at least, "coming out." Perhaps her gradually increasing feeling of accustomedness to the change in her life was doing it for her. She said more in her letters, and said

it in a more interesting way. It was perhaps rather suggestive of the development of a girl who was on the verge of becoming a delightful sort of woman.

Lying upon his back in bed, rendered, it may be, a trifle susceptible by the weakness of slow convalescence, he found a certain habit growing upon him--a habit of reading her letters several times, and of thinking of her as it had not been his nature to think of women; also he slowly awakened to an interest in the arrival of the English mails. The letters actually raised his spirits and had an excellent physical effect. His doctor always found him in good condition after he had heard from his wife.

"Your letters, my dear Emily," Walderhurst once wrote, "are a great pleasure to me. You are to-day exactly as you were at Mallowe,--the creature of amiable good cheer. Your comfort stimulates me."

"How dear, how dear?" Emily cried to the silence of the study, and kissed the letter with impassioned happiness.

The next epistle went even farther. It absolutely contained "things" and referred to the past which it was her joy to pour libations before in secret thought. When her eye caught the phrase "the days at Mallowe" in the middle of a sheet, she was almost frightened at the rush of pleasure which swept over her. Men who were less aloof from sentimental moods used such phrases in letters, she had read and heard. It was almost as

if he had said "the dear old days at Mallowe" or "the happy days at Mallowe," and the rapture of it was as much as she could bear.

"I cannot help remembering as I lie here," she read in actual letters as she went on, "of the many thoughts which passed through my mind as I drove over the heath to pick you up. I had been watching you for days. I always liked particularly your clear, large eyes. I recall trying to describe them to myself and finding it difficult. They seemed to me then to resemble something between the eyes of a very nice boy and the eyes of a delightful sheep-dog. This may not appear so romantic a comparison as it really is."

Emily began most softly and sweetly to cry. Nothing more romantic could she possibly have imagined.

"I thought of them in spite of myself as I drove across the moor, and I could scarcely express to you how angry I was at Maria. It seemed to me that she had brutally imposed on you only because she had known she might impose on a woman with such a pair of eyes. I was angry and sentimental at one and the same time. And to find you sitting by the wayside, absolutely worn out with fatigue and in tears, moved me really more than I had anticipated being moved. And when you mistook my meaning and stood up, your nice eyes looking into mine in such ingenuous appeal and fear and trouble, I have never forgotten it, my dear, and I never shall."

His mood of sentiment did not sit easily upon him, but it meant a real and interesting quite human thing.

Emily sat alone in the room and brooded over it as a mother might brood over a new-born child. She was full of tremulous bliss, and, dwelling with reverent awe upon the wonder of great things drawing nearer to her every hour, wept for happiness as she sat.

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The same afternoon Lady Maria Bayne arrived. She had been abroad taking, in no dull fashion, various "cures," which involved drinking mineral waters while promenading to the sounds of strains of outdoor music, and comparing symptoms wittily with friends equal to amazing repartee in connection with all subjects.

Dr. Warren was an old acquaintance, and as he was on the point of leaving the house as she entered it she stopped to shake hands with him.

"It's rather unfortunate for a man when one can only be glad to see him in the house of an enemy."

She greeted him with, "I must know what you are doing here. It's not possible that Lady Walderhurst is fretting herself into fiddle-strings because her husband chooses to have a fever in India."

"No, she is behaving beautifully in all respects. May I have a few minutes' talk with you, Lady Maria, before you see her?"

"A few minutes' talk with me means something either amusing or portentous. Let us walk into the morning-room."

She led the way with a rustle of silk petticoats and a suggestion of lifted eyebrows. She was inclined to think that the thing sounded more portentous than amusing. Thank Heaven! it was not possible for Emily to have involved herself in annoying muddles. She was not that kind of woman.

When she came out of the room some twenty minutes later she did not look quite like herself. Her smart bonnet set less well upon her delicate little old face, and she was agitated and cross and pleased.

"It was ridiculous of Walderhurst to leave her," she was saying. "It was ridiculous of her not to order him home at once. It was exactly like her,--dear and ridiculous."

In spite of her agitation she felt a little grotesque as she went upstairs to see Emily,--grotesque, because she was obliged to admit to herself that she had never felt so curiously excited in her life. She felt as she supposed women did when they allowed themselves to shed tears through excitement; not that she was shedding tears, but she was

"upset," that was what she called it.

As the door opened Emily rose from a chair near the fire and came slowly towards her, with an awkward but lovely smile.

Lady Maria made a quick movement forward and caught hold of both her hands.

"My good Emily," she broke forth and kissed her. "My excellent Emily," and kissed her again. "I am completely turned upside down. I never heard such an insane story in my life. I have seen Dr. Warren. The creatures were mad."

"It is all over," said Emily. "I scarcely believe it was true now."

Lady Maria being led to a sofa settled herself upon it, still wearing her complex expression of crossness, agitation, and pleasure.

"I am going to stay here," she said, obstinately. "There shall be no more folly. But I will tell you that they have gone back to India. The child was a girl."

"It was a girl?"

"Yes, absurdly enough."

"Oh," sighed Emily, sorrowfully. "I'm sure Hester was afraid to write to me."

"Rubbish!" said Lady Maria. "At any rate, as I remarked before, I am going to stay here until Walderhurst comes back. The man will be quite mad with gratified vanity."