

Chapter Twenty Three

It was a damp and depressing day on which Lord Walderhurst arrived in London. As his carriage turned into Berkeley Square he sat in the corner of it rather huddled in his travelling-wraps and looking pale and thin.

He was wishing that London had chosen to show a more exhilarating countenance to him, but he himself was conscious of being possessed by something more nearly approaching a mood of eagerness than he remembered

experiencing at any period of his previous existence. He had found the voyage home long, and had been restless. He wanted to see his wife. How agreeable it would be to meet, when he looked across the dinner-table, the smile in her happy eyes. She would grow pink with pleasure, like a girl, when he confessed that he had missed her. He was curious to see in her the changes he had felt in her letters. Having time and opportunities for development, she might become an absolutely delightful companion. She had looked very handsome on the day of her presentation at Court. Her height and carriage had made her even impressive. She was a woman, after all, to be counted on in one's plans.

But he was most conscious that his affection for her had warmed. A slight embarrassment was commingled with the knowledge, but that was the natural result of his dislike to the sentimental. He had never felt a shadow of sentiment for Audrey, who had been an extremely light, dry, empty-headed person, and he had always felt she had been adroitly thrust

upon him by their united families. He had not liked her, and she had not liked him. It had been very stupidly trying. And the child had not lived an hour. He had liked Emily from the first, and now--It was an absolute truth that he felt a slight movement in the cardiac region when the carriage turned into Berkeley Square. The house would look very pleasant when he entered it. Emily would in some subtle way have arranged that it should wear a festal, greeting air. She had a number of nice, little feminine emotions about bright fires and many flowers. He could picture her childlike grown-up face as it would look when he stepped into the room where they met.

Some one was ill in Berkeley Square, evidently very ill. Straw was laid thick all along one side of it, depressing damp, fresh straw, over which the carriage rolled with a dull drag of the wheels.

It lay before the door of his own house, he observed, as he stepped out. It was very thickly scattered. The door swung open as the carriage stopped. Crossing the threshold, he glanced at the face of the footman nearest to him. The man looked like a mute at a funeral, and the expression was so little in accord with his mood that he stopped with a feeling of irritation. He had not time to speak, however, before a new sensation arrested his attention,--a faint odour which filled the place.

"The house smells like a hospital," he exclaimed, in great annoyance.

"What does it mean?"

The man he addressed did not answer. He turned a perturbed awkward face to his superior in rank, an older man, who was house steward.

In the house of mortal pain or death there is but one thing more full of suggestion than the faint smell of antiseptics,--the gruesome, cleanly, unpleasant odour,--that is, the unnatural sound of the whispering of hushed voices. Lord Walderhurst turned cold, and felt it necessary to stiffen his spine when he heard his servant's answer and the tone in which it was made.

"Her ladyship, my lord--her ladyship is very low. The doctors do not leave her."

"Her ladyship?"

The man stepped back deferentially. The door of the morning-room had been opened, and old Lady Maria Bayne stood on the threshold. Her worldly air of elderly gaiety had disappeared. She looked a hundred. She was almost dilapidated. She had allowed to relax themselves the springs which held her together and ordinarily supplied her with sprightly movement.

"Come here!" she said.

When he entered the room, aghast, she shut the door.

"I suppose I ought to break it to you gently," she said shakily, "but I shall do no such thing. It's too much to expect of any woman who has gone through what I have during these last three days. The creature is dying; she may be dead now."

She sank on the sofa and began to wipe away pouring tears. Her old cheeks were pale and her handkerchief showed touches of rose-pink on its dampness. She was aware of their presence, but was utterly indifferent. Walderhurst stared at her haggard disorder and cleared his throat, finding himself unable to speak without doing so.

"Will you have the goodness to tell me," he said with weird stiffness, "what you are talking about?"

"About Emily Walderhurst," she answered. "The boy was born yesterday, and she has been sinking ever since. She cannot possibly last much longer."

"She!" he gasped, turning lead colour. "Cannot possibly last,--Emily?"

The wrench and shock were so unnatural that they reached that part of his being where human feeling was buried under selfishness and inhuman conventionality. He spoke, and actually thought, of Emily first.

Lady Maria continued to weep shamelessly.

"I am over seventy," she said, "and the last three days have punished me quite enough for anything I may have done since I was born. I have been in hell, too, James. And, when she could think at all, she has only thought of you and your miserable child. I can't imagine what is the matter with a woman when she can care for a man to such an extent. Now she has what she wants,--she's dying for you."

"Why wasn't I told?" he asked, still with the weird and slow stiffness.

"Because she was a sentimental fool, and was afraid of disturbing you. She ought to have ordered you home and kept you dancing attendance, and treated you to hysterics."

No one would have resented such a course of action more derisively than Lady Maria herself, but the last three days had reduced her to something like hysteria, and she had entirely lost her head.

"She has been writing cheerfully to me--"

"She would have written cheerfully to you if she had been seated in a cauldron of boiling oil, it is my impression," broke in her ladyship.

"She has been monstrously treated, people trying to murder her, and she afraid to accuse them for fear that you would disapprove. You know you have a nasty manner, James, when you think your dignity is interfered with."

Lord Walderhurst stood clenching and unclenching his hands as they hung by his sides. He did not like to believe that his fever had touched his brain, but he doubted his senses hideously.

"My good Maria," he said, "I do not understand a word you say, but I must go and see her."

"And kill her, if she has a breath left! You will not stir from here. Thank Heaven! here is Dr. Warren."

The door had opened and Dr. Warren came in. He had just laid down upon the coverlet of a bed upstairs what seemed to be the hand of a dying woman, and no man like himself can do such a thing and enter a room without a singular look on his face.

People in a house of death inevitably whisper, whatsoever their remoteness from the sick-room. Lady Maria cried out in a whisper:

"Is she still alive?"

"Yes," was the response.

Walderhurst went to him.

"May I see her?"

"No, Lord Walderhurst. Not yet."

"Does that mean that it is not yet the last moment?"

"If that moment had obviously arrived, you would be called."

"What must I do?"

"There is absolutely nothing to be done but to wait. Brent, Forsythe, and Blount are with her."

"I am in the position of knowing nothing. I must be told. Have you time to tell me?"

They went to Walderhurst's study, the room which had been Emily's holy of holies.

"Lady Walderhurst was very fond of sitting here alone," Dr. Warren remarked.

Walderhurst saw that she must have written letters at his desk. Her own pen and writing-tablet lay on it. She had probably had a fancy for writing her letters to himself in his own chair. It would be like her to have done it. It gave him a shock to see on a small table a thimble and a pair of scissors.

"I ought to have been told," he said to Dr. Warren.

Dr. Warren sat down and explained why he had not been told.

As he spoke, interest was awakened in his mind by the fact that Lord Walderhurst drew towards him the feminine writing-tablet and opened and shut it mechanically.

"What I want to know," he said, "is, if I shall be able to speak to her. I should like to speak to her."

"That is what one most wants," was Dr. Warren's non-committal answer, "at such a time."

"You think I may not be able to make her understand?"

"I am very sorry. It is impossible to know."

"This," slowly, "is very hard on me."

"There is something I feel I must tell you, Lord Walderhurst." Dr. Warren kept a keen eye on him, having, in fact, felt far from attracted by the man in the past, and wondering how much he would be moved by certain truths, or if he would be moved at all. "Before Lady Walderhurst's illness, she was very explicit with me in her expression of her one desire. She begged me to give her my word, which I could not

have done without your permission, that whatsoever the circumstances, if life must be sacrificed, it should be hers."

A dusky red shot through Walderhurst's leaden pallor.

"She asked you that?" he said.

"Yes. And at the worst she did not forget. When she became delirious, and we heard that she was praying, I gathered that she seemed to be praying to me, as to a deity whom she implored to remember her fervent pleading. When her brain was clear she was wonderful. She saved your son by supernatural endurance."

"You mean to say that if she had cared more for herself and less for the safety of the child she need not have been as she is now?"

Warren bent his head.

Lord Walderhurst's eyeglass had been dangling weakly from its cord. He picked it up and stuck it in his eye to stare the doctor in the face. The action was a singular, spasmodic, hard one. But his hands were shaking.

"By God!" he cried out, "if I had been here it should not have been so!"

He got up and supported himself against the table with the shaking

hands.

"It is very plain," he said, "that she has been willing to be torn to pieces upon the rack to give me the thing I wanted. And now, good God in heaven, I feel that I would have strangled the boy with my own hands rather than lose her."

In this manner, it seemed, did a rigid, self-encased, and conventional elderly nobleman reach emotion. He looked uncanny. His stiff dignity hung about him in rags and tatters. Cold sweat stood on his forehead and his chin twitched.

"Just now," he poured forth, "I don't care whether there is a child or not. I want her--I care for nothing else. I want to look at her, I want to speak to her, whether she is alive or dead. But if there is a spark of life in her, I believe she will hear me."

Dr. Warren sat and watched him, wondering. He knew curious things of the human creature, things which most of his confrères did not know. He knew that Life was a mysterious thing, and that even a dying flame of it might sometimes be fanned to flickering anew by powers more subtle than science usually regards as applicable influences. He knew the nature of the half-dead woman lying on her bed upstairs, and he comprehended what the soul of her life had been,--her divinely innocent passion for a self-centred man. He had seen it in the tortured courage of her eyes in hours of mortal agony.

"Don't forget," she had said. "Our Father which art in Heaven. Don't let anyone forget. Hallowed be thy name."

The man, leaning upon his shaking hands before him, stood there, for these moments at least, a harrowed thing. Not a single individual of his acquaintance would have known him.

"I want to see her before the breath leaves her," he gave forth in a harsh, broken whisper. "I want to speak. Let me see her."

Dr. Warren left his chair slowly. Out of a thousand chances against her, might this one chance be for her,--the chance of her hearing, and being called back to the shores she was drifting from, by this stiff, conventional fellow's voice. There was no knowing the wondrousness of a loving human thing, even when its shackles were loosening themselves to set it free.

"I will speak to those in charge with me," he said. "Will you control every outward expression of feeling?"

"Yes."

Adjoining Lady Walderhurst's sleeping apartment was a small boudoir where the medical men consulted together. Two of them were standing near the window conversing in whispers.

Walderhurst merely nodded and went to wait apart by the fire. Ceremony had ceased to exist. Dr. Warren joined the pair at the window. Lord Walderhurst only heard one or two sentences.

"I am afraid that nothing, now, can matter--at any moment."

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Those who do not know from experience what he saw when he entered the next room have reason to give thanks to such powers as they put trust in.

There ruled in the large, dim chamber an awful order and silence. The faint flickering of the fire was a marked sound. There was no other but a fainter and even more irregular one heard as one neared the bed. Sometimes it seemed to stop, then, with a weak gasp, begin again. A nurse in uniform stood in waiting; an elderly man sat on a chair at the bedside, listening and looking at his watch, something white and lifeless lying in his grasp,--Emily Walderhurst's waxen, unmoving hand. The odour of antiseptics filled the nostrils. Lord Walderhurst drew near. The speaking sign of the moment was that neither nurse nor doctor stirred.

Emily lay low upon a pillow. Her face was as bloodless as wax and was a little turned aside. The Shadow was hovering over it and touched her

closed lids and the droop of her cheek and corners of her mouth. She was far, far away.

This was what Walderhurst felt first,--the strange remoteness, the lonely stillness of her. She had gone alone far from the place he stood in, and which they two familiarly knew. She was going, alone, farther still. As he stood and watched her closed eyes,--the nice, easily pleased eyes,--it was they themselves, closed on him and all prosaic things and pleasures, which filled him most strangely with that sense of her loneliness, weirdly enough, hers, not his. He was not thinking of himself but of her. He wanted to withdraw her from her loneliness, to bring her back.

He knelt down carefully, making no sound, stealthily, not removing his eyes from her strange, aloof face. He slowly dared to close his hand on hers which lay outside the coverlet. And it was a little chill and damp,--a little chill.

A power, a force which hides itself in human things and which most of them know not of, was gathering within him. He was warm and alive, a living man; his hand as it closed on the chill of hers was warm; his newly awakened being sent heat to it.

He whispered her name close to her ear.

"Emily!" slowly, "Emily!"

She was very far away and lay unmoving. Her breast scarcely stirred with the faintness of her breath.

"Emily! Emily!"

The doctor slightly raised his eyes to glance at him. He was used to death-bed scenes, but this was curious, because he knew the usual outward aspect of Lord Walderhurst, and its alteration at this moment suggested abnormal things. He had not the flexibility of mind which revealed to Dr. Warren that there were perhaps abnormal moments for the most normal and inelastic personages.

"Emily!" said his lordship, "Emily!"

He did not cease from saying it, in a low yet reaching whisper, at regular intervals, for at least half an hour. He did not move from his knees, and so intense was his absorption that the presence of those who came near was as nothing.

What he hoped or intended to do he did not explain to himself. He was of the order of man who coldly waves aside all wanderings on the subjects of occult claims. He believed in proven facts, in professional aid, in the abolition of absurdities. But his whole narrow being concentrated itself on one thing,--he wanted this woman back. He wanted to speak to her.

What power he unknowingly drew from the depths of him, what exquisite answering thing he reached at, could not be said. Perhaps it was only some remote and subtle turn of the tide of life and death which chanced to come to his aid.

"Emily!" he said again, after many times.

Dr. Warren at this moment met the lifted eyes of the doctor who was counting her pulse, and in response to his look went to him.

"It seems slightly stronger," Dr. Forsythe whispered.

The slow, faint breathing changed a shade; there was heard a breath slightly, very slightly deeper, less flickering, then another.

Lady Walderhurst slightly stirred.

"Remain where you are," whispered Dr. Warren to her husband, "and continue to speak to her. Do not alter your tone. Go on."

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Emily Walderhurst, drifting out on a still, borderless, white sea, sinking gently as she floated, sinking in peaceful painlessness deeper and deeper in her drifting until the soft, cool water lapped her lips

and, as she knew without fear, would soon cover them and her quiet face, hiding them for ever,--heard from far, very far away, across the whiteness floating about her, a faint sound which at first only fell upon the stillness without meaning. Everything but the silence had been left behind aeons ago. Nothing remained but the soundless white sea and the slow drifting and sinking as one swayed. It was more than sleep, this still peace, because there was no thought of waking to any shore.

But the far-off sound repeated itself again, again, again and again, monotonously. Something was calling to Something. She was so given up to the soft drifting that she had no thoughts to give, and gave none. In drifting so, one did not think--thought was left in the far-off place the white sea carried one from. She sank quietly a little deeper and the water touched her lip. But Something was calling to Something, something was calling something to come back. The call was low, low and strange, so regular and so unbroken and insistent, that it arrested, she knew not what. Did it arrest the floating and the swaying in the enfolding sea? Was the drifting slower? She could not rouse herself to think, she wanted to go on. Did she no longer feel the water lapping against her lip? Something was calling to Something still. Once, aeons ago, before the white sea had borne her away, she would have understood.

"Emily, Emily, Emily!"

Yes, once she would have known what the sound meant. Once it had meant something, a long time ago. It had even now disturbed the water, and

made it cease to lap so near her lip.

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It was at this moment that one doctor had raised his eyes to the other, and Lady Walderhurst had stirred.

When Walderhurst left his place beside his wife's bed, Dr. Warren went with him to his room. He made him drink brandy and called his man to him. "You must remember," he said, "that you are an invalid yourself."

"I believe," was the sole answer, given with an abstracted knitting of the brows,--"I believe that in some mysterious way I have made her hear me."

Dr. Warren looked grave. He was a deeply interested man. He felt that he had been looking on at an almost incomprehensible thing.

"Yes," was his reply. "I believe that you have."

About an hour later Lord Walderhurst made his way downstairs to the room in which Lady Maria Bayne sat. She still looked a hundred years old, but her maid had redressed her toupee, and given her a handkerchief neither damp nor tinted with rubbed-off rouge. She looked at her relative a shade more leniently, but still addressed him with something of the manner of a person undeservedly chained to a malefactor. Her irritation

was not modified by the circumstance that it was extremely difficult to be definite in the expression of her condemnation of things which had made her hideously uncomfortable. Having quite approved of his going to India in the first place, it was not easy to go thoroughly into the subject of the numerous reasons why a man of his years and responsibilities ought to have realised that it was his duty to remain at home and take care of his wife.

"Incredible as it seems," she snapped, "the doctors think there is a slight change, for the better."

"Yes," Walderhurst answered.

He leaned against the mantel and gazed into the fire.

"She will come back," he added in a monotone.

Lady Maria stared at him. She felt that the man was eerie, Walderhurst, of all men on earth!

"Where do you think she has been?" She professed to make the inquiry with an air of reproof.

"How should one know?" rather with the old stiffness. "It is impossible to tell."

Lady Maria Bayne was not the person possessing the temperament to incline him to explain that, wheresoever the outer sphere might be to which the dying woman had been drifting, he had been following her, as far as living man could go.

The elderly house steward opened the door and spoke in the hollow whisper.

"The head nurse wished to know if your ladyship would be so good as to see Lord Oswyth before he goes to sleep."

Walderhurst turned his head towards the man. Lord Oswyth was the name of his son. He felt a shock.

"I will come to the nursery," answered Lady Maria. "You have not seen him yet?" turning to Walderhurst.

"How could I?"

"Then you had better come now. If she becomes conscious and has life enough to expect anything, she will expect you to burst forth into praises of him. You had better at least commit to memory the colour of his eyes and hair. I believe he has two hairs. He is a huge, fat, overgrown thing with enormous cheeks. When I saw his bloated self-indulgent look yesterday, I confess I wanted to slap him."

Her description was not wholly accurate, but he was a large and robust child, as Walderhurst saw when he beheld him.

From kneeling at the pillow on which the bloodless statue lay, and calling into space to the soul which would not hear, it was a far cry to the warmed and lighted orris-perfumed room in which Life had begun.

There was the bright fire before which the high brass nursery fender shone. There was soft linen hanging to be warmed, there was a lace-hung cradle swinging in its place, and in a lace-draped basket silver and gold boxes and velvet brushes and sponges such as he knew nothing about. He had not been in such a place before, and felt awkward, and yet in secret abnormally moved, or it seemed abnormally to him.

Two women were in attendance. One of them held in her arms what he had come to see. It was moving slightly in its coverings of white. Its bearer stood waiting in respectful awe as Lady Maria uncovered its face.

"Look at it," she said, concealing her relieved elation under a slightly caustic manner. "How you will relish the situation when Emily tells you that he is like you, I can't be as sure as I should be of myself under the same circumstances."

Walderhurst applied his monocle and gazed for some moments at the object before him. He had not known that men experienced these curiously

unexplainable emotions at such times. He kept a strong hold on himself.

"Would you like to hold him?" inquired Lady Maria. She was conscious of a benevolent effort to restrain the irony in her voice.

Lord Walderhurst made a slight movement backward.

"I--I should not know how," he said, and then felt angry at himself. He desired to take the thing in his arms. He desired to feel its warmth. He absolutely realised that if he had been alone with it, he should have laid aside his eyeglass and touched its cheek with his lips.

Two days afterwards he was sitting by his wife's pillow, watching her shut lids, when he saw them quiver and slowly move until they were wide open. Her eyes looked very large in her colourless, more sharply chiselled face. They saw him and him only, as light came gradually into them. They did not move, but rested on him. He bent forward, almost afraid to stir.

He spoke to her as he had spoken before.

"Emily!" very low, "Emily!"

Her voice was only a fluttering breath, but she answered.

"It--was--you!" she said.