

Chapter Twenty Four

Such individuals as had not already thought it expedient to gradually loosen and drop the links of their acquaintance with Captain Alec Osborn did not find, on his return to his duties in India, that the leave of absence spent in England among his relatives had improved him. He was plainly consuming enormous quantities of brandy, and was steadily going, physically and mentally, to seed. He had put on flesh, and even his always dubious good looks were rapidly deserting him. The heavy young jowl looked less young and more pronounced, and he bore about an evil countenance.

"Disappointment may have played the devil with him," it was said by an elderly observer; "but he has played the devil with himself. He was a wrong'un to begin with."

When Hester's people flocked to see her and hear her stories of exalted life in England, they greeted her with exclamations of dismay. If Osborn had lost his looks, she also had lost hers. She was yellow and haggard, and her eyes looked over-grown. She had not improved in the matter of temper, and answered all effusive questions with a dry, bitter little smile. The baby she had brought back was a puny, ugly, and tiny girl. Hester's dry, little smile when she exhibited her to her relations was not pretty.

"She saved herself disappointment by being a girl," she remarked. "At all events, she knows from the outset that no one can rob her of the chance of being the Marquis of Walderhurst."

It was rumoured that ugly things went on in the Osborn bungalow. It was known that scenes occurred between the husband and wife which were not of the order admitted as among the methods of polite society. One evening Mrs. Osborn walked slowly down the Mall dressed in her best gown and hat, and bearing on her cheek a broad, purpling mark. When asked questions, she merely smiled and made no answer, which was extremely awkward for the well-meaning inquirer.

The questioner was the wife of the colonel of the regiment, and when the lady related the incident to her husband in the evening, he drew in his breath sharply and summed the situation up in a few words.

"That little woman," he said, "lives every day through twenty-four hours of hell. One can see it in her eyes, even when she professes to smile at the brute for decency's sake. The awfulness of a woman's forced smile at the devil she is tied to, loathing him and bearing in her soul the thing, blood itself could not wipe out. Ugh! I've seen it once before, and I recognised it in her again. There will be a bad end to this."

There probably would have been, with the aid of unlimited brandy and unrestrained devil, some outbreak so gross that the social laws which rule men who are "officers and gentlemen" could not have ignored or

overlooked it. But the end came in an unexpected way, and Osborn was saved from open ignominy by an accident.

On a certain day when he had drunk heavily and had shut Hester up with him for an hour's torture, after leaving her writhing and suffocating with sobs, he went to examine some newly bought firearms. In twenty minutes it was he who lay upon the floor writhing and suffocating, and but a few minutes later he was a dead man. A charge from a gun he had believed unloaded had finished him.

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Lady Walderhurst was the kindest of women, as the world knew. She sent for little Mrs. Osborn and her child, and was tender goodness itself to them.

Hester had been in England four years, and Lord Oswyth had a brother as robust as himself, when one heavenly summer afternoon, as the two women sat on the lawn drinking little cups of tea, Hester made a singular revelation, and made it without moving a muscle of her small countenance.

"I always intended to tell you, Emily," she began quietly, "and I will tell you now."

"What, dear?" said Emily, holding out to her a plate of tiny buttered

scones. "Have some of these nice, little hot ones."

"Thank you." Hester took one of the nice, little hot ones, but did not begin to eat it. Instead, she held it untouched and let her eyes rest on the brilliant flower terraces spread out below. "What I meant to tell you was this. The gun was not loaded, the gun Alec shot himself with, when he laid it aside."

Emily put down her tea-cup hastily.

"I saw him take out the charge myself two hours before. When he came in, mad with drink, and made me go into the room with him, Ameerah saw him. She always listened outside. Before we left The Kennel Farm, the day he tortured and taunted me until I lost my head and shrieked out to him that I had told you what I knew, and had helped you to go away, he struck me again and again. Ameerah heard that. He did it several times afterwards, and she always knew. She always intended to end it in some way. She knew how drunk he was that last day, and--It was she who went in and loaded the gun while he was having his scene with me. She knew he would go and begin to pull the things about without having the sense to know what he was doing. She had seen him do it before. I know it was she who put the load in. We have never uttered a word to each other about it, but I know she did it, and that she knows I know. Before I married Alec, I did not understand how one human being could kill another. He taught me to understand, quite. But I had not the courage to do it myself. Ameerah had."

And while Lady Walderhurst sat gazing at her with a paling face, she began quietly to eat the little buttered scone.

THE END