Esther Waters — Chapter 11

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XI.

For days nothing was talked of but the ball — how this man had danced, the bad taste of this woman's dress, and the possibility of a marriage. The ball had brought amusement to all, to Esther it had brought happiness. Her happiness was now visible in her face and audible in her voice, and Sarah's ironical allusions to her inability to learn to read no longer annoyed her, no longer stirred her temper — her love seemed to induce forgiveness for all and love for everything. The days were filled with fugitive meetings and hurried words, but in the evenings when their work was done they lingered about the farm buildings, listening to the rooks, seeing the lights die in the west; and in the summer darkness about nine she tripped by his side when he took the letters to the post.

The wheat stacks were thatching, and in the rick-yard, in the carpenter's shop, and in the whist of the woods they talked of love and marriage. They lay together in the warm valleys, listening to the tinkling of the sheep-bell, seeing the golden hours darken in the west. One evening, putting his pipe aside, William threw his arm round her and whispered that she was his wife. The words sounded delicious in her ears, but she could hardly hear what he said after; a sort of weakness seemed to come over her. It must be the beer she had drunk. She wished she had not taken that last glass. She could not struggle with him....

The stars were shining when he followed her across the down. He besought of her to listen, but she fled down the long, grey road and up the stairs to her room. Margaret was in bed, and awakening a little asked her what had kept her out so late. She did not answer, and she heard Margaret fall asleep. She remembered the supper-table. Sarah, who had come in late, had sat down by her; William sat on the opposite side; Mrs. Latch was in her place, the jockeys were all together; Mr. Swindles, his snuff-box on the table; Margaret and Grover. Every one had eaten a great deal, and Mr. Leopold had gone to the beer cellar many times. She thought that she remembered feeling a little dizzy when William asked her to come for a stroll up the hill. The cows were lying down, and the rooks came home noisily through the deepening sky. They had passed through the hunting gate; they had wandered far into the loneliness of the hills. So far she remembered, she would remember no further, and lay all night staring into the darkness, and when Margaret called her in the morning she was pale and death-like.

"Whatever is the matter? You do look ill."

"I did not sleep all last night. My head aches as if it would drop off. I don't feel as if I could go to work to-day."

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"That’s the worst of being a servant. Well or ill, it makes no matter." Margaret turned from the glass, but she held her hair in her left hand, leaning her head so that she might roll it into a knot, and having pinned it she looked at Esther again. “You do look bad," she remarked dryly.

Esther struggled through her dressing, and they went downstairs. Never had they been so late! Half-past seven, and the shutters still up! William, who was cleaning boots in the pantry, waited until he heard the baize door which separated the back premises from the front of the house close, then he ran to the kitchen, where he expected to find Esther alone. Mrs. Latch asked him what he wanted. He fumbled some excuse, and retreated. There were visitors in the house, and he had a good deal to do that morning, and Esther kept close to Mrs. Latch. She could not meet his eyes — she would die of shame. During breakfast it suddenly became necessary that she should answer him, and Sarah saw that Esther and William were no longer friends. Her face brightened.

"Well I never! Look at her! She sits there over her tea-cup as melancholy as a prayer-meeting.”

“What is it to you?" said William.

“What’s it to me? I don’t like an ugly face at the breakfast-table, that’s all.”

"I wouldn’t be your looking-glass, then. Lucky there isn’t one here.”

Sarah and William drifted into an angry altercation, in the middle of which Esther walked out of the room. And during dinner she hardly spoke at all. She was called upon to make it up. After dinner she could only escape from him by shutting herself up in her room, and she did not come down until she thought he had gone out with the carriage. She was, however, some few minutes too soon, and William came running down the passage to meet her. He laid his hand supplicatingly on her arm.

“Don’t touch me!" she said, and her eyes filled with dangerous light.

"What nonsense this is, Esther!... Come, don’t lay it on too thick.”

"Go away. Don’t speak to me!”

“Just listen one moment, that’s all.”

“Go away. If you don’t, I’ll go straight to Mrs. Barfield.”

William hesitated, and she passed into the kitchen and shut the door in his face. He had gone a trifle pale, and after lingering a few moments hurried away to the stables. Esther saw him spring on the box.

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As it was frequent with Esther not to speak to any one with whom she had had a dispute for a week or fifteen days, her continued sulk excited little suspicion, and the cause of the quarrel was attributed to some trifle. Sarah said —

"Men are such fools. He is always begging of her to forgive him. Just look at him — he is still after her, following her into the wood-shed."

It was as Sarah said. William followed Esther from the kitchen to the scullery, from the scullery to the wood-shed. She rarely answered him a yes or no, but would push past him, and if he forcibly barred the way she would say, "Let me go by, will you? You are interfering with my work." And if he still insisted, she spoke of appealing to Mrs. Barfield.

She had not willed to give herself; he had taken advantage of her in a moment of weakness. This was how she understood her sin; and if her heart sometimes softened, and an insidious thought whispered that it did not matter since they were going to be married, an instinct forced her to act in contradiction to her desire. She felt that she could only win his respect by refusing forgiveness for a long while. The religion in which her soul moved and lived — the sternest Protestantism — strengthened and enforced the original convictions and the prejudices of her race, and the natural shame which she had first felt almost disappeared in the violence of her virtue. She even ceased to fear discovery. What did it matter who knew, since she knew? And on her knees at night she opened her heart to God. Christ looked down, but He seemed stern and unforgiving. Hers was the unpardonable sin, the sin which her race had elected to fight against. She lay down heavy and sullen at heart. Her Christ was the Christ of her forefathers; and He had not forgiven, because she could not forgive herself.

The days seemed to bring no change, and, wearied by her stubbornness, William said, “Well, let her sulk," and he went out with Sarah; and when Esther saw them go down the yard her heart said, “Let him take her out, I don’t want him." For she knew it to be an attempt to make her jealous, and that he should employ such a trick angered her still further against him, and when they met in the garden, where she had gone with some food for the cats, and he said, "Forgive me, Esther; I only went out with Sarah because you drove me wild," she closed her teeth, and refused to answer. But he stood in her path, determined not to leave her. "I am very fond of you, Esther, and I will marry you as soon as I have earned enough, or won enough money to give you a comfortable ’ome.”

“You are a wicked man; I will never marry you.”

“I am very sorry, Esther. But I am not as bad as you think for. You let your temper get the better of you. So soon as I have got a bit of money together — ”

"If you were a good man you would ask me to marry you now.”

"I will if you like, but the truth is that I have only three pounds in the world. I have been unlucky lately — ”

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“You think of nothing but that wicked betting. Come, let me pass; I’m not going to listen to a lot of lies.”

“After the Leger — ”

“Let me pass. I will not speak to you.”

“But look here, Esther; marriage or no marriage, we can’t go on in this way; they’ll be suspecting something shortly."

“I shall leave Woodview." She had hardly spoken the words when it seemed clear to her that she must leave, and the sooner the better. “Come, let me pass.... If Mrs. Barfield — ”

An angry look passed over William’s face, and he said —

"I want to act honest with you, and you won’t let me. If ever there was a sulky pig!... Sarah’s quite right; you are just the sort that would make hell of a man’s life.”

She was bound to make him respect her. She had vaguely felt from the beginning that this was her only hope, and now the sensation developed and defined itself into a thought, and she decided that she would not yield, but would continue to affirm her belief that he must acknowledge his sin, and then come and ask her to marry him. Above all things, Esther desired to see William repentant. Her natural piety, filling as it did her entire life, unconsciously made her deem repentance an essential condition of their happiness. How could they be happy if he were not a God-fearing man? This question presented itself constantly, and in a sort of dim, vague way she felt that she could not marry him until he had asked forgiveness of the Lord; then they would be joined together, and would love each other faithfully unto death. Such was the natural and habitual tone of a mind which the world had not yet broken. But in conflict with her prejudices, her natural love of the man was as a sun shining above a fog-laden valley; rays of passion pierced her stubborn nature, dissolving it, and unconsciously her eyes sought William’s, and unconsciously her steps strayed from the kitchen when her ears told her he was in the passage. Had Esther relented earlier the fate of her life would have been different, for when her heart had conquered her prejudice, when her love went out freely to William, when she longed to throw herself in his arms, saying, "Yes, I love you; make me your wife," she noticed, or thought she noticed, that he avoided her eyes, and she felt that thoughts of which she knew nothing had obtained a footing in his mind, and she was full of foreboding.

Her heart being intent on him, she was aware of much that escaped the ordinary eye, and she was the first to notice when the drawing-room bell rang, and Mr. Leopold rose, that William would say, "My legs are the youngest, don’t you stir."

No one else, not even Sarah, thought that William intended more than to keep in Mr. Leopold’s good graces, but Esther, although unable to guess the truth, heard the still tinkling bell ringing

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the knell of her hopes. She noted, too, the time he remained upstairs, and asked herself anxiously what it was that detained him so long. The weather had turned colder lately,... was it a fire that was wanted? She did not know who was in the drawing-room. She succeeded in finding out from Margaret that Miss Mary and Mrs. Barfield had gone to Southwick to make a call, and she heard from one of the boys that the Gaffer and Ginger had ridden over in the morning to Fendon Fair, and had not yet returned; therefore it must have been Peggy who had rung the bell. Esther continued her work. Suddenly she remembered something — something that had been wholly forgotten. The first Sunday, the first time she went to the library for family prayers Peggy was sitting on the little green sofa, and as Esther passed across the room to her place she saw her cast a glance of admiration on William's tall figure. That glance had passed away, but memory of it was now vivid in her brain, and all that night Esther saw the girl with the pale face and coal-black hair looking at her through the darkness.

Next day Esther waited for the bell that was to call her lover from her. The afternoon wore slowly away, and she had begun to hope she was mistaken when the metal tongue commenced calling. She heard the baize door close behind him; but the bell still continued to utter little pathetic notes. A moment after all was still in the corridor.

Like one sunk to the knees in quicksands she felt that the time had come for a decided effort. She felt that she must fight for her lover, but how? William seemed to avoid her, and by his conduct seemed to wish that their quarrel might endure. But her pride and temper had both fallen from her, and she lived conscious only of him, noting every sign; she was alive to all that related to him, she divined his intentions, and met him in the passage when he least expected her.

“I'm always getting in your way," she said, with a low, nervous laugh.

“No harm in that;... fellow-servants; there must be give and take.”

They stood looking at each other. The time had come, an explanation was inevitable, but at that moment the drawing-room bell rang above their heads. William said, “I must answer that bell," and he turned from her, passing through the baize door before she could say another word.

One day Sarah remarked that William seemed to spend a great deal of his time in the drawing-room. Esther started out of her moody contemplation, and, speaking instinctively, she said, “I don't think much of ladies who go after their servants.”

Every one looked up. Mrs. Latch laid her carving-knife on the meat and fixed her eyes on her son.

"Lady!" said Sarah; "she's no lady! Her mother used to mop out the yard before she was 'churched.'"

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"I can tell you what," said William, "you had better mind what you are a-saying of, for if any of your talk got wind upstairs you'd lose yer situation, and it might be some time before yer got another."

"Lose my situation! and a good job too. I shall always be able to suit mesel'; don't you fear about me. But if it comes to talking about situations, I can tell you that you are more likely to lose yours than I am to lose mine."

William hesitated, and while he sought a judicious reply Mrs. Latch and Mr. Leopold, putting forth their authority, brought the discussion to a close. The jockey-boys exchanged grins, Sarah sulked, Mr. Swindles and Mr. Leopold pursed up their mouths in consideration. The elder servants felt that the matter would not rest in the servants' hall; it would be the theme of conversation that evening in the "Red Lion," and the next day of the entire town.

On the following day Esther, about four o'clock, saw Mrs. Barfield, Miss Mary, and Peggy walk across the yard towards the garden, and as Esther had to go soon after to the woodshed she saw Peggy slip out of the garden by a bottom gate and make her way through the evergreens. Esther hastened back to the kitchen and stood waiting for the bell to ring. She had not to wait long; the bell tinkled, but so faintly that Esther said, "She only just touched it, it is a signal; he was on the look-out for it; she did not want any one else to hear."

She remembered the thousands of pounds she had heard that the young lady possessed, and the beautiful dress she would wear. There was no hope for her. How could there be? Her poor little wages and her print dress! He would never look at her again! But oh! how cruel and wicked it was! How could one who had so much come to steal from one who had so little? Oh, it was very cruel and very wicked, and no good would come of it either to her or to him; of that she felt quite sure. God always punished the wicked. She knew he did not love Peggy. It was sin and shame; and after his promises — after what had happened. Never would she have believed him to be so false. Then her thought turned to passionate hatred of the girl who had so cruelly robbed her. He had gone through that baize door, and no doubt he was sitting by Peggy in the new drawing-room. He had gone where she could not follow. He had gone where the grand folk lived in idleness, in the sinfulness of the world and the flesh, eating and gambling, thinking of nothing else, and with servants to wait on them, obeying their orders and saving them from every trouble. She knew that these fine folk thought servants inferior beings. But was she not of the same flesh and blood as they? Peggy wore a fine dress, but she was no better; take off her dress and they were the same, woman to woman.

Passing through the baize door, she walked down the wide passage. A few steps brought her to the foot of a polished oak staircase, lit by a large window in coloured glass, on either side of which there were statues. The staircase sloped slowly to an imposing landing set out with columns and blue vases and embroidered curtains. The girl saw these things vaguely, and she was conscious of a profusion of rugs, matting, and bright doors, and of her inability to decide which door was the drawing-room door — the drawing-room of which she had heard so much, and where even now, amid gold furniture and sweet-scented air, William listened to the wicked

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woman who had tempted him away from her. Suddenly William appeared, and seeing Esther he seemed uncertain whether to draw back or come forward. Then his face took an expression of mixed fear and anger; and coming rapidly towards her, he said —

“What are you doing here?"... Then, changing his voice, "This is against the rules of the ’ouse.”

"I want to see her.”

“Anything else! What do you want to say to her? I won’t have it, I tell you.... What do you mean by spying after me? That’s your game, is it?”

"I want to speak to her.”

“We’ll talk of that in the kitchen," and taking her by the shoulders William forced her out of the hall. With averted face the young lady fled up the oak staircase, her handkerchief to her lips. Esther made a movement as if to follow, but William prevented her. She turned and walked down the passage and entered the kitchen. Her face was one white tint, her short, strong arms hung tremblingly, and William saw that it would be better to temporise.

“Now look here, Esther," he said, “you ought to be damned thankful to me for having prevented you from making a fool of yourself."

Esther’s eyelids quivered, and then her eyes dilated. She could not speak.

"Now, if Miss Margaret," continued William, "had — ”

“Go away! go away! I am — " At that moment the steel of a large, sharp-pointed knife lying on the table caught her eye. She snatched it up, and seeing blood she rushed at him.

William retreated from her, and Mrs. Latch caught her arm. Esther shrieked and threw the knife; it struck the wall, falling with a rattle on the meat screen. Escaping from Mrs. Latch, who had just entered, she rushed to secure it, but her strength giving way at that moment she fell back in a dead faint.

"What have you been doing to the girl?" said Mrs. Latch.

"Nothing, mother.... We had a few words, that was all. She said I should not go out with Sarah.”

"That is not true.... I can read the lie in the face; a good girl doesn’t take up a knife unless a man well-nigh drives her mad.”

"That’s right; always side against your son!... If you don’t believe me get what you can out of her yourself." And, turning on his heel, he walked out of the house.

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Mrs. Latch saw him pass down the yard towards the stables. She bathed Esther's face, and when she opened her eyes she looked at Mrs. Latch questioningly, unable to understand why the old woman stood by her.

"Are you better now, dear?"

"Yes, but — but what — " Then remembrance struggled back. "Is he gone? Did I strike him? I remember that I — "

"You did not hurt him."

"I don't want to see him again. Far better not. I was mad. I did not know what I was doing."

"You will tell me about it another time, dear."

"Where is he? tell me that; I must know."

"Gone to the stables, I think; but you must not go after him — you'll see him to-morrow."

"I do not want to go after him; but he isn't hurt? That's what I want to know."

"No, he isn't hurt…. You're getting stronger.... Lean on me. You'll begin to feel better when you are in bed. I'll bring you up your tea."

"Yes, I shall be all right presently. But how'll you manage to get the dinner?"

"Don't you worry about that; you go upstairs and lie down."

A desolate hope floated over the surface of her brain that William might be brought back to her. In the evening she got up and went downstairs. The kitchen was full of people: Margaret, Sarah, and Grover were there, and she heard that immediately after lunch Mr. Leopold had been sent for, and the Gaffer had instructed him to pay William a month's wages, and see that he left the house that very instant. Sarah, Margaret, and Grover watched Esther's face, and were surprised at her indifference. She even seemed pleased. She was pleased: nothing better could have happened. William was now separated from her rival; released from her bad influence he would return to his real love. At the first sign she would go to him, she would forgive him. But a little later, when the dishes came down from the dining-room, it was whispered that Peggy was not there.

Later in the evening, when the servants were going to bed, it became known that she had left the house, that she had taken the six o'clock to Brighton. Esther turned from the foot of the stair with a wild look. Margaret caught her. "It is no use, dear; you can do nothing to-night."

"I can walk to Brighton."

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"No, you can’t; you don’t know the way, and even if you did you don’t know where they are.”

Neither Sarah nor Grover made any remark, and in silence the servants went to their rooms. Margaret closed the door and turned to look at Esther, who had fallen on the chair, her eyes fixed in vacancy.

“I know what it is; I was the same when Jim Story got the sack. It seems as if one couldn’t live through it, and yet one does somehow."

"I wonder if they’ll marry.”

"Most probable. She has a lot of money.”

Two days after a cab stood in the yard in front of the kitchen window. Peggy’s luggage was being piled upon it — two large, handsome basket boxes with the initials painted on them. Kneeling on the box-seat, the coachman leaned over the roof making room for another — a small box covered with red cowhide and tied with a rough rope. The little box in its poor simplicity brought William back to Esther, whelming her for a moment in so acute a sense of her loss that she had to leave the kitchen. She went into the scullery, drew the door after her, sat down, and hid her face in her apron. A stifled sob or two, and then she recovered her habitual gravity of expression, and continued her work as if nothing had happened.

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