Esther Waters — Chapter 40

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XL.

"Sarah, you must make an effort and try to dress yourself."

"Oh, I do feel that bad, I wish I was dead!"

"You must not give way like that; let me help you to put on your stockings."

Sarah looked at Esther. "You're very good to me, but I can manage." When she had drawn on her stockings her strength was exhausted, and she fell back on the pillow.

Esther waited a few minutes. "Here 're your petticoats. Just tie them round you; I'll lend you a dressing-gown and a pair of slippers."

William was having breakfast in the parlour. "Well, feeling a bit poorly?" he said to Sarah. "What 'll you have? There's a nice bit of fried fish.... Not feeling up to it?"

"Oh, no! I couldn't touch anything." Sarah let herself drop on the sofa.

"A cup of tea'll do you good," said Esther. "You must have a cup of tea, and a bit of toast just to nibble. William, pour her out a cup of tea."

When she had drunk the tea she said she felt a little better.

"Now," said William, "let's 'ear all about it. Esther has told you, no doubt, that we intend to do all we can to help you."

"You can't help me... I'm done for," she replied dolefully.

"I don't know about that," said William. "You gave that brute Bill Evans the plate to pawn, so far as I know."

"There isn't much more to tell. He said the horse was sure to win. He was at thirty to one at that time. A thousand to thirty. Bill said that with that money we could buy a public-house in the country. He wanted to settle down, he wanted to get out of — I don't want to say nothing against him. He said if I would only give him this chance of
leading a respectable life. We was to be married immediately after."

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"He told you all that, did he? He said he'd give you a 'ome of your own, I know. A regular rotter; that man is about as bad as they make 'em. And you believed it all?"

"It wasn't so much what I believed as what I couldn't help myself. He had got that influence over me that my will wasn't my own. I don't know how it is — I suppose men have stronger natures than women. I 'ardly knew what I was doing; it was like sleep-walking. He looked at me and said, 'You'd better do it.' I did it, and I suppose I'll have to go to prison for it. What I says is just the truth, but no one believes tales like that. How long do you think they'll give me?"

"I hope we shall be able to get you out of this scrape. You got thirty pounds on the plate. Esther has told you that I'm ready to lend you the money to get it out."

"Will you do this? You're good friends indeed.... But I shall never be able to pay you back such a lot of money."

"We won't say nothing about paying back; all we want you to do is to say that you'll never see that fellow again."

A change of expression came over Sarah's face, and William said, "You're surely not still hankering after him?"

"No, indeed I'm not. But, whenever I meets him, he somehow gets his way with me. It's terrible to love a man as I love him. I know he don't really care for me — I know he is all you say, and yet I can't help myself. It is better to be honest with you."

William looked puzzled. At the end of a long silence he said, "If it's like that I don't see that we can do anything."

"Have patience, William. Sarah don't know what she's saying. She'll promise not to see him again."

"You're very kind to me. I know I'm very foolish. I promised before not to see him, and I couldn't keep my promise."

"You can stop with us until you get a situation in the County," said Esther, "where you'll be out of his way."

"I might do that."

"I don't like to part with my money," said William, "if it is to do no one any good." Esther looked at him, and he added, "It is just as Esther wishes, of course; I'm not giving you the money, it is she."

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“It is both of us," said Esther; “you’ll do what I said, Sarah?”

"Oh yes, anything you say, Esther," and she flung herself into her friend’s arms and wept bitterly.

"Now we want to know where you pawned the plate," said William.

"A long way from here. Bill said he knew a place where it would be quite safe. I was to say that my mistress left it to me; he said that would be sufficient.... It was in the Mile-end Road.”

"You’d know the shop again?" said William.

"But she’s got the ticket," said Esther.

“No, I ain’t got the ticket; Bill has it.”

"Then I’m afraid the game’s up.”

“Do be quiet," said Esther angrily. “If you want to get out of lending the money, say so and have done with it.”

"That’s not true, Esther. If you want another thirty to pay him to give up the ticket, you can have it.”

Esther thanked her husband with one quick look. "I’m sorry," she said, "my temper is that hasty. But you know where he lives," she said, turning to the wretched woman who sat on the sofa pale and trembling.

“Yes, I know where he lives. 13 Milward Square, Mile-end Road.”

"Then we’ve no time to lose; we must go after him at once.”

“No, William dear; you must not; you’d only lose your temper, and he might do you an injury.”

“An injury! I’d soon show him which was the best man of the two.”

"I’ll not hear of it, Sarah; he mustn’t go with you.”

"Come, Esther, don’t be foolish. Let me go.”

He had taken his hat from the peg. Esther got between him and the door.

“I forbid it," she said; “I will not let you go — perhaps to have a fight, and with that cough.”

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William was coughing. He had turned pale, and he said, leaning against the table, “Give me something to drink, a little milk.”

Esther poured some into a cup. He sipped it slowly. "I’ll go upstairs," she said, “for my hat and jacket. You’ve got your betting to attend to." William smiled. “Sarah, mind, he’s not to go with you.”

“You forget what you said last night about the betting.”

“Never mind what I said last night about the betting; what I say now is that you’re not to leave the bar. Come upstairs, Sarah, and dress yourself, and let’s be off.”

He nodded affectionately across the bar and they pulled the swing doors and went out. Stack and Journeyman were waiting to speak to him. They had lost heavily over old Ben and didn’t know how they’d pull through; and the whole neighbourhood was in the same plight; the bar was filled with gloomy faces.

And as William scanned their disconcerted faces — clerks, hair-dressers, waiters from the innumerable eating-houses — he could not help thinking that perhaps more than one of them had taken money that did not belong to them to back Ben Jonson.

The unexpected disaster had upset all their plans, and even the wary ones who had a little reserve fund could not help backing outsiders, hoping by the longer odds to retrieve yesterday’s losses. At two the bar was empty, and William waited for Esther and Sarah to return from Mile-end. It seemed to him that they were a long time away. But Mile-end is not close to Soho; and when they returned, between four and five, he saw at once that they had been unsuccessful. He lifted up the flap in the counter and all three went into the parlour.

"He left Milward Square yesterday," Esther said. "Then we went to another address, and then to another; we went to all the places Sarah had been to with him, but no tidings anywhere.”

Sarah burst into tears. "There’s no more hope,"she said. "I’m done for; they’ll come and take me away. How much do you think I’ll get? They won’t give me ten years, will they?”

"I can see nothing else for you to do," said Esther, "but to go straight back to your people and tell them the whole story, and throw yourself on their mercy.”

"Do you mean that she should say that she pawned the plate to get money to back a horse?”

"Of course I do.”

"It will make the police more keen than ever on the betting-houses.”

"That can’t be helped.”

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"She'd better not be took here," said William; "it will do a great deal of harm.... It don't make no difference to her where she's took, do it?"

Esther did not answer.

"I'll go away. I don't want to get no one into trouble," Sarah said, and she got up from the sofa.

At that moment Charles opened the door, and said, "You're wanted in the bar, sir."

William went out quickly. He returned a moment after. There was a scared look on his face. "They're here," he said. He was followed by two policemen. Sarah uttered a little cry.

"Your name is Sarah Tucker?" said the first policeman.

"Yes."

"You're charged with robbery by Mr. Sheldon, 34 Cumberland Place."

"Shall I be taken through the streets?"

"If you like to pay for it, you can go in a cab," the police-officer replied.

"I'll go with you, dear," Esther said. William plucked her by the sleeve. "It will do no good. Why should you go?"

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