

Jeanne Of The Marshes

By

E. Phillips Oppenheim

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Chapter I.1

The Princess opened her eyes at the sound of her maid's approach. She turned her head impatiently toward the door.

"Annette," she said coldly, "did you misunderstand me? Did I not say that I was on no account to be disturbed this afternoon?"

Annette was the picture of despair. Eyebrows and hands betrayed alike both her agitation of mind and her nationality.

"Madame," she said, "did I not say so to monsieur? I begged him to call again. I told him that madame was lying down with a bad headache, and that it was as much as my place was worth to disturb her. What did he answer? Only this. That it would be as much as my place was worth if I did not come up and tell you that he was here to see you on a very urgent matter. Indeed, madame, he was very, very impatient with me."

"Of whom are you talking?" the Princess asked.

"But of Major Forrest, madame," Annette declared. "It is he who waits below."

The Princess closed her eyes for a moment and then slowly opened them. She stretched out her hand, and from a table by her side took up a small gilt mirror.

"Turn on the lights, Annette," she commanded.

The maid illuminated the darkened room. The Princess gazed at herself in the mirror, and reaching out again took a small powder-puff from its case and gently dabbed her face. Then she laid both mirror and powder-puff back in their places.

"You will tell monsieur," she said, "that I am very unwell indeed, but that since he is here and his business is urgent I will see him. Turn out the lights, Annette. I am not fit to be seen. And move my couch a little, so."

"Madame is only a little pale," the maid said reassuringly. "That makes nothing. These Englishwomen have all too much colour. I go to tell monsieur."

She disappeared, and the Princess lay still upon her couch, thinking. Soon she heard steps outside, and with a little sigh she turned her head toward the door. The man who entered was tall, and of the ordinary type of well-born Englishmen. He was carefully dressed, and his somewhat scanty hair was arranged to the best advantage. His features were hard and lifeless. His eyes were just a shade too close together. The maid ushered him in and withdrew at once.

"Come and sit by my side, Nigel, if you want to talk to me," the Princess said. "Walk softly, please. I really have a headache."

"No wonder, in this close room," the man muttered, a little ungraciously. "It smells as though you had been burning incense here."

"It suits me," the Princess answered calmly, "and it happens to be my room. Bring that chair up here and say what you have to say."

The man obeyed in silence. When he had made himself quite comfortable, he raised her hand, the one which was nearest to him, to his lips, and afterwards retained it in his own.

"Forgive me if I seem unsympathetic, Ena," he said. "The fact is, everything has been getting on my nerves for the last few days, and my luck seems dead out."

She looked at him curiously. She was past middle age, and her face showed signs of the wear and tear of life. But she still had fine eyes, and the rejuvenating arts of Bond Street had done their best for her.

"What is the matter, Nigel?" she asked. "Have the cards been going against you?"

He frowned and hesitated for a moment before replying.

"Ena," he said, "between us two there is an ancient bargain, and that is that we should tell the truth to one another. I will tell you what it is that is worrying me most. I have suspected it for some time, but this afternoon it was absolutely obvious. There is a sort of feeling at the club. I can't exactly describe it, but I am conscious of it directly I come into the room. For several days I have scarcely been able to get a rubber. This afternoon, when I cut in with Harewood and Mildmay and another fellow, two of them made some sort of an excuse and went off. I pretended not to notice it, of course, but there it was. The thing was apparent, and it is the very devil!"

Again she looked at him closely.

"There is nothing tangible?" she asked. "No complaint, or scandal, or anything of that sort?"

He rejected the suggestion with scorn.

"No!" he said. "I am not such an idiot as that. All the same there is the feeling. They don't care to play bridge with me. There is only young Engleton who takes my part, and so far as playing bridge for money is concerned, he would be worth the whole lot put together if only I could get him away from them--make up a little party somewhere, and have him to myself for a week or two."

The Princess was thoughtful.

"To go abroad at this time of the year," she remarked, "is almost impossible. Besides, you have only just come back."

"Absolutely impossible," he answered. "Besides, I shouldn't care to do it just now. It looks like running away. A week or so ago you were talking of taking a villa down the river. I wondered whether you had thought any more of it."

The Princess shook her head.

"I dare not," she answered. "I have gone already further than I meant to. This house and the servants and carriages are costing me a small fortune. I dare not even look at my bills. Another house is not to be thought of."

Major Forrest looked gloomily at the shining tip of his patent boot.

"It's jolly hard luck," he muttered. "A quiet place somewhere in the country, with Engleton and you and myself, and another one or two, and I should be able to pull through. As it is, I feel inclined to chuck it all."

The Princess looked at him curiously. He was certainly more than ordinarily pale, and the hand which rested upon the side of his chair was twitching a little nervously.

"My dear Nigel," she said, "do go to the chiffoinier there and help yourself to a drink. I hate to see you white to the lips, and trembling as though death itself were at your elbow. Borrow a little false courage, if you lack the real thing."

The man obeyed her suggestion with scarcely a protest.

"I had hoped, Ena," he remarked a little peevishly, "to have found you more sympathetic."

"You are so sorry for yourself," she answered, "that you seem scarcely to need my sympathy. However, sit down and talk to me reasonably."

"I talk reasonably enough," he answered, "but I really am hard up against it. Don't think I have come begging. I know you've done all you can, and it's a matter with me now of more than a few hundreds. My only hope is Engleton. Can't you suggest anything?"

The Princess rested her head slightly upon the long slender fingers of her right hand. Bond Street had taken care of her complexion, but the veins in her hand were blue, and art had no means of concealing a certain sharpness of features and the thin lines about the eyes, nameless suggestions of middle age. Yet she

was still a handsome woman. She knew how to dress, and how to make the best of herself. She had the foreigner's instinct for clothes, and her figure was still irreproachable. She sat and looked with a sort of calculating interest at the man who for years had come as near touching her heart as any of his sex. Curiously enough she knew that this new aspect in which he now presented himself, this incipient cowardice-- the first-fruits of weakening nerves--did not and could not affect her feelings for him. She saw him now almost for the first time with the mask dropped, no longer cold, cynical and calculating, but a man moved to his shallow depths by what might well seem to him, a dweller in the narrow ways of life, as a tragedy. It looked at her out of his grey eyes. It showed itself in the twitching of his lips. For many years he had lived upon a little less than nothing a year. Now for the first time his means of livelihood were threatened. His long-suffering acquaintances had left him alone at the card-table.

"You disappoint me, Nigel," she said. "I hate to see a man weaken. There is nothing against you. Don't act as though there could be. As to this little house-party you were speaking of, I only wish I could think of something to help you. By the by, what are you doing to- night?"

"Nothing," he answered, "except that Engleton is expecting me to dine with him."

"I have an idea," the Princess said slowly. "It may not come to anything, but it is worth trying. Have you met my new admirer, Mr. Cecil de la Borne?"

Forrest shook his head.

"Do you mean a dandified-looking boy whom you were driving with in the Park yesterday?"

The Princess nodded.

"We met him a week or so ago," she answered, "and he has been very attentive. He has a country place down in Norfolk, which from his description is, I should think, like a castle in Hermitland. Jeanne and I are dining with him to-night at the Savoy. You and Engleton must come, too. I can arrange it. It is just possible that

we may be able to manage something. He told me yesterday that he was going back to Norfolk very soon. I fancy that he has a brother who keeps rather a strict watch over him, and he is not allowed to stay up in town very long at a time."

"I know the name," Forrest remarked. "They are a very old Roman Catholic family. We'll come and dine, if you say that you can arrange it. But I don't see how we can all hope to get an invitation out of him on such a short acquaintance."

The Princess was looking thoughtful.

"Leave it to me," she said. "I have an idea. Be at the Savoy at a quarter past eight, and bring Lord Ronald."

Forrest took up his hat. He looked at the Princess with something very much like admiration in his face. For years he had dominated this woman. To-day, for the first time, she had had the upper hand.

"We will be there all right," he said. "Engleton will only be too glad to be where Jeanne is. I suppose young De la Borne is the same way."

The Princess sighed.

"Every one," she remarked, "is so shockingly mercenary!"

Chapter I.2

The Princess helped herself to a salted almond and took her first sip of champagne. The almonds were crisp and the champagne dry. She was wearing a new and most successful dinner-gown of black velvet, and she was quite sure that in the subdued light no one could tell that the pearls in the collar around her neck were imitation. Her afternoon's indisposition was quite forgotten. She nodded at her host approvingly.

"Cecil," she said, "it is really very good of you to take in my two friends like this. Major Forrest has just arrived from Ostend, and I was very anxious to hear about the people I know there, and the frocks, and all the rest of it. Lord Ronald always amuses me, too. I suppose most people would call him foolish, but to me he only seems very, very young."

The young man who was host raised his glass and bowed towards the Princess.

"I can assure you," he said, "that it has given me a great deal of pleasure to make the acquaintance of Major Forrest and Lord Ronald, but it has given me more pleasure still to be able to do anything for you. You know that."

She looked at him quickly, and down at her plate. Such glances had become almost a habit with her, but they were still effectual. Cecil de la Borne leaned across towards Forrest.

"I hear that you have been to Ostend lately, Major Forrest," he said. "I thought of going over myself a little later in the season for a few days."

"I wouldn't if I were you," Forrest answered. "It is overrun just now with the wrong sort of people. There is nothing to do but gamble, which doesn't interest me particularly; or dress in a ridiculous costume and paddle about in a few feet of water, which appeals to me even less."

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