

The Other Woman's Child

By Dora Sigerson Shorter

Lady Osborne regarded the woman before her with contempt and anger.

"I have told you before," she said haughtily, "I did not wish you to speak to the child again."

The woman flushed, and spoke hotly.

"It is hard," she muttered, "not to be allowed to speak to him and to see him for a little time, after all the months I had of him."

"It is my wish," returned Lady Osborne; "and that must be enough."

"For his sake," the woman went on, "I put my child aside; I gave him what God had sent me for my own. My boy was weaned that yours might have his nourishment. For months you cared nothing about him, and left me to do for him what you could not. And now the woman who gave the strength to his little body and started the growth in his limbs is forbidden to see him or speak to him."

Lady Osborne rose from her seat, and motioned the woman out of the room.

"Begone!" she said; "I have done with you. What you did you were well paid for. I will not have you come about here again. I shall give orders that you are not to be allowed inside the park gates."

The woman's face grew white with a great rage. She was silent for a moment; then her expression changed.

"You will not let me in to see my own child?"

"Your *own* child? What do you mean, woman? What do you mean?" Lady Osborne seized her arm with a hard grip.

"Yes, *my* child," the woman said deliberately. "One of the two children who lay upon my breast died, but it was not mine. It was not he that I put away from his home upon my heart that went, but yours."

"And that child out there"—Lady Osborne dragged the woman to the window—"whose child is that? Answer me whose child is that?"

The woman looked out. Chasing the butterflies from rose to rose in the garden went a little boy of seven, his fair hair like a halo in the sun, his face like a flower. The woman looked a moment; her eyes softened, and she was silent.

The other woman shook her roughly.

"Answer me!" she cried; "and begone from this house, or I will have you whipped out."

The woman dragged herself away from the hands that held her; she raised her arm as if to strike, but did not.

"It is my child," she whined; "my child."

"Take him away!" Lady Osborne staggered as if about to fall. "Take your brat away with you at once."

The woman grew pale, and drew back. "No; he will live with you, and be a gentleman," she said, in a low voice.

Lady Osborne opened the French window and called the child from the garden. He ran towards her, a rose crushed in his hand.

"Frederick," she said in a hard voice, "you must go at once with this woman. Take her hand, and go away at once."

The child stood in the middle of the room, staring, till slowly he realized what had been said to him. He dropped the crumpled rose-leaves on the floor, and, with a shrill cry, ran to Lady Osborne's side. "I cannot go with her! Oh! mother, don't send me away. I will be good, indeed, indeed!" He hid his face in her dress, and sobbed bitterly. Lady Osborne drew her gown from his hand. "You must go," she said; but the woman hurried to the door, as though she were frightened.

"No, no!" she said. And without another word, opened the door, and was gone.

Lady Osborne made a step to call her, then drew back, and sank into a chair. The child asked leave to go back to his play. Now that the woman had gone he felt no fear. The unusual occurrence meant nothing; to a child nothing is unusual or wonderful. But Lady Osborne lay back in her chair like one asleep, and did not heed him; so he went out to the garden, and she did not know. She was thinking in a dazed way that it was well the woman had left the child. She could not face the world and tell it this child she so loved and was so proud of was not her own—that she had been fooled and robbed all this time; that a dead child in some unknown grave was hers, and the interloper that for seven years had taken his place in everything—even in his mother's heart—was the child of a nurse—a common peasant woman.

She got up from her chair, and went to the window, and again saw the boy running amongst the roses. She called him, and he came smiling into the room. Lady Osborne seated herself in a chair, and placed him before her. He raised his arms to put them around her neck, but she caught his hands and held him away from her. Her ghastly face was before him, hard and cold, and he shrank from a gaze he had never beheld before.

"That's it; shrink away from me. I have discovered you at last, interloper, thief!"

The boy grew white and afraid.

"I have discovered you, and I believe you know it," the woman said to the innocent child who stood silent before her. "Do you see these rooms," she continued, in a dull voice, "these beautiful rooms, full of valuable things?" She drew him to the window again. "Do you see those fields, stretching everywhere around the house? Whom do those belong to—whom do you imagine they belong to?"

The child looked up to her, and answered as he had been taught so often.

"All to mother's darling son," he said, smiling to think they were on a subject they could both understand.

"No, not to mother's darling son, lying so cold in his little baby grave; but to you, a beggar's brat—to you—to you." She thrust him out into the garden, and sank into her chair. There she remained, still and cold, till the hours brought her back to consciousness, and it seemed to her when she woke that all the time she lay there she would have been at peace if it were not for the sobbing of a child that she could not move to still.

II

In the morning she was awakened from a short troubled slumber by the voice of the child in the room. He clambered upon the bed, laughing at her eyes still blinking with sleep. But she awoke with the grief of yesterday still upon her, and wondered that he had forgotten so soon.

"Yesterday it was my child that woke me; to-day another woman's," she thought, and hid her face in her hands. He stood at the window, drumming upon it with his fingers. What! all this beauty was not hers. The fine limbs, the proud head, those dear eyes. Not hers. She may not look upon them with pride again—rather with envy and hatred. She may not lovingly trace in them

again a likeness to her dead husband. This child of the other woman. What was it there for?—to grow up in place of her own and come into his inheritance. All the Osborne lands, the old mansions she was so proud of—everything to go to this nobody. Yes, now she realized it all. Yesterday she had lost her son, the son who was so carefully reared, the son who was to have made the proud old name continue. And today her childless heart had turned to ashes. She bid the boy leave the room, and he went, chilled by her voice. She could no longer be loving to this child of a stranger, since her child had known no love. She would not hold this boy to her heart, since her own would never lie there. Yet as he passed to the door she caught him to her and kissed his hair and face, as though she had been long parted from him.

But every day, from that forward, she kept the child in strict surveyance. He grew timid under the reproachful eyes he always felt were upon him. As the years passed they grew further apart; he understood she could not love him, but did not know why, and he was conscious that he was afraid of her. Often when she called him he would come to her slowly, and hang back at the last, frightened beneath her eyes. Then she would smile a bitter smile, thinking it was the spirit of the menial coming out in him, and showing distress before its superior. Once when he had given a false answer to her she laughed in his face. How could she have thought him an Osborne, the cowardly, lying, beggar's brat! Every day as she watched him she seemed to find the defects in him she credited his class with. She had discovered him picking the prettiest cakes from the plate at tea for himself. She had found him beating a boy smaller than himself without a reason. The reason was one the child would sooner have died than tell. The smaller boy had called her an ugly name. She thought him without feeling when one day he discovered her in tears, and did not speak to her; he had stood before her in silence, then gone away. The truth was the boy was too shocked to speak. Mother in tears! What sort of terrible trouble was there to make a grown-up person weep? They did not cry for any of the griefs he had. This was something he could not approach, comfort, or understand. He stood terrified, dumb, before her, and left her, to cry by himself for hours outside alone.

When he was seventeen he fell in love with the gate-keeper's daughter, and he sought an interview with his mother. She listened with impatience as he stammered the story. "Kind seeks kind," she muttered. "It is all I expected." She did not reason or argue with him, but simply sent the girl away. And the boy had to conquer his heart alone. Only once had she spoken to him upon the subject; it was to say if he wished to marry the girl when he was of age he could, that it probably would be a suitable match for him then. The lad did not know how to receive the speech—whether as a concession or as an insult—but he vowed in his heart he should not forget the girl he loved.

In his nineteenth year a lady came to visit his mother, bringing her daughter with her. He was struck with admiration for the girl's fair face, and his heart went out of him in its first real love. His mother noticed this, and to humiliate him brought the lodge girl back, and set her as servant in the house. The trick was lost upon the lad. He passed the girl upon the stairs, and did not know her. The poor thing had never thought the heir to the Osborne estates had ever meant anything by his passionate promises, and had long ago turned her eyes upon another man; so she did her work with cheerfulness, and never said anything to remind him that he had made her promise to wait till he was of an age to marry.

III

On the eve of her son's twenty-first birthday Lady Osborne sat alone in her boudoir. Her heart, feeding on its own bitterness for years, had grown more cruel towards the boy every day. Tomorrow the village would be in festive garb for the coming of age of her son. *Her* son! Tomorrow she would dethrone him, cast him off. No longer could she bear the thought of him—a stranger—possessing the old lands—the noble name—the ancient house. Better let the name die out in truth than have it falsely carried on by one who had no claim upon it. She laid her forehead upon her hands as a great wave of grief came over her. Tomorrow her own little child, who lay so far away, should have been by her side, to receive the congratulations of his people. Tomorrow the one dear girl of her old friend should have plighted with him her troth. How often when she and this friend sat together had they planned the match between their children. And now all things had happened as she might have wished. After her first brief visit this friend had come often; she was staying now for the coming of age. The children had seen much of each other, and were full of love. All was as it was planned, only her boy lay dead in his baby grave, and his place was filled by a servant's child. A servant's child was coming of age to-morrow, a servant's child was to lead Enid Geraldine to the altar, a servant's child was to carry on the two proudest names in the county. She dare not let it be. In the midst of her brooding the door opened, and her son entered. His face was flushed, and he had the consciousness of some great exultation about him. He walked to the window, then turned and faced his mother, breaking forth into sudden speech. In the glow of his enthusiasm the frost of her unsympathetic attitude towards him was forgotten; like a stream let loose by summer from the manacles of winter, his voice rang forth.

"To-morrow is the people's day, mother, not mine," he said, walking up and down the room, gesticulating as he went. "Have I ever told you my plans, mother—what I mean to do when I am of age? I have dreamt of it so long. To-morrow I inherit all my grandfather's wealth; I shall be rich—a millionaire. All this money that I have never earned, and that I can never spend personally, I shall own, and those fields stretching away from the window for miles and miles—those empty fields that we never use, those woods full of nests and rabbit-burrows—the houses of animals, while human beings lie to sleep in the streets of the cities—they are all mine, mother, all mine, mine! But I shall change it. To-morrow is the people's day; I shall tell them so. To-morrow! to-morrow! All these useless fields shall be covered with little red houses, and every house shall have its bit of ground and its garden full of roses. Those useless woods shall be cut down to build the houses—the useless money shall make this thing happen—the little houses will be homes for happy people. There will be no angry voices heard and no pale-faced children seen there. We shall call it The Happy Valley. By the river we shall build a great factory, and there the men shall work all day weaving cloth and manufacturing goods, in which they too shall share some of the profits. And the women at home shall be safe from the unsexing influence of city poverty; they shall make lace and mind their children, and live the lives of women. And if the money does not hold out, we must narrow in the boundaries of the parks, till the house stands within its wide, beautiful garden alone!"

Lady Osborne clenched her hands.

"Not a branch shall be broken, not a stone turned to let a ragged crowd of beggars upon the land. You talk like a fool!"

"I shall not do what you would not wish, mother; but come some way with me. We are not people to spend the money that has been unspent and growing for three generations. Our people

were never reckless nor fond of show; but what good is it lying always idle? I shall only build a hundred cottages over by the river, and save a hundred families from poverty and hunger.”

“I hate the people!” Lady Osborne said; “dirty, thieving, ungrateful creatures. Let them wallow in their own mud!”

“It is the fault of circumstances if they have such faults. Oh, mother! we must save them, I want to do so, when I see the men shuffling from beershop to beershop; when I see the women dirty, neglected, loud-voiced—hardly women; when I see the little children shrinking from blows, shouted at, cursed at, taught to see everything wrong, sitting with poverty, playing with sin, cheek to cheek with crime. What can they do, mother? what can they do to become men and women?”

“Let them go down,” his mother said. “It the survival of the fittest; blow the seed, the chaff will fly in the wind. They are the drifts, the unfitted, the people who had not the strength to keep strong; idleness, weakness, disease, all have brought them to the earth. They are the parasites of the world. Stamp them out if you can; keep them from multiplying.”

“You are wrong, mother. Give them their chance, and they will show you that you are wrong. It’s education, money, peace, beauty, they want to regain their self-respect. They are human beings, people like you and me, with all our emotions, only played upon by a rougher hand. Fate has been kind to us. If I had been reared amongst their surroundings, I should have shuffled, thieved, sinned too.”

Lady Osborne rose with a low, bitter laugh. “Most probably, most probably.”

The young man’s face flushed at her tone. “You are cruel and hard!” he said excitedly.

“Yet I tell you this. It’s the vulgarity alone you notice, for in society I have met refined liars, immorality, bitter cruelty, brutality, aye, even thieves too, for people who have no temptation to steal a purse will rob men or women of their character. We have all the same vices, mother,”—he smiled,—“but we do not drop our h’s. We drink champagne, they drink beer; we destroy reputations, they burgle houses; we have gold, therefore we have water to wash in; we are clean because we have amassed wealth, because we have robbed them of true comfort, sweated them, starved them, so that they built us our fortunes. Let me exchange my hard, cold money for flesh and blood!”

“You can leave me,” Lady Osborne answered coldly. “I am tired of argument. I shall speak to you to-morrow. When you know what I have to say you will be better able to form your own speech.” She turned from him. “How strange,” she thought, “that, in spite of education and refined surroundings, his soul should be ever with the people he sprang from! How impossible it is to stamp out heredity!”

The young man, crestfallen, left the room. As the door closed after him, Lady Osborne’s friend entered the room by the open French window.

Lady Geraldine, a tall woman, who had no fault except pride of race, was sweet to look upon even in the grey autumn of her life. She took a chair by her old friend’s side, and laid her hand upon her’s.

“You are sad,” she said, “and this should not be. To-morrow your son will have reached that manhood for which he was born; he is like a white rose that has unfolded from bud to flower. God grant that his life may be as pure and sweet when the years drop from him like the petals of the rose, leaving him to look back instead of forward.”

Lady Osborne raised her head, but did not smile. She looked with a hard, set face through the window into the gathering dusk.

“You are poetical, dear friend,” she said, “and who can say your white rose when it comes to bloom may not be a rose at all, but a weed, blown by the winds of fate from some neighbour’s garden into yours?”

“You joke, though you still look sad,” said Lady Geraldine smiling. “Your rose is a cutting from an old, old tree; he is so like his father, everyday I see it more plainly—his walk, his voice—can you not see the resemblance? But oh,” she added enthusiastically, “it is fine to me always—a young man come to manhood, the long apprenticeship to youth past, the world before him. Look at your boy with his mission to fulfil, the grand old name to carry on, to keep proud and stainless as it has ever been, to die with the knowledge that he has handed it on to his sons unsullied in his turn, and to rest at last with those great and brave men who gave it to him to pass on. Sometimes I almost wish my dear girl had been a boy—since I was to have but one, that it should have been a man-child.”

“Hush! hush! You torture me.”

“Why, dear? I do not understand you to-day.” Lady Geraldine looked with surprise into her friend’s white face.

“I suppose there is one thing you could not forgive”—Lady Osborne spoke slowly—“if your girl married with my knowledge a servant’s child?”

Lady Geraldine, shocked and astonished, gazed at her friend for a minute in silence, then she said,—“Why do you ask me such questions? My daughter is going to marry into a family as good, as pure, as proud as her own. She is going to marry your son.”

“She cannot marry my son.”

Lady Geraldine rose to her feet, her face white and stricken as her friend’s. As she stood thus the door opened, and the two young people came in. They did not notice the stern women who watched them from the window. The girl passed with her hands full of roses, and the youth with eyes for nothing else followed her, and sat by her side upon a couch.

“So you do not love me, after all,” he said passionately, trying to take her hands—and the women at the window gave a start, the one with hope, the other with disappointment. The girl laughed, and put her hands behind her.

“Look into my eyes and tell me you don’t love me.” He caught her hands, but she would not face him, and all the roses tumbled to the floor.

“No, I won’t look.”

“You are afraid,” he said, laughing softly, “to tell so big a falsehood.”

“You make me ashamed, looking at me so,” she said; “your eyes seem to say too many flattering things.”

“They only say what my lips do—that you are the most beautiful and the dearest woman in the world. Let your lips only say, ‘Frederick, I love you.’

“Let us shut our eyes and imagine we are in the dark, then it will be easier to say,” she said.

When the youth, at her bidding, closed his eyes, she stole from his side and ran smiling towards the door. In a moment he had followed her, and stood between her and it.

“My answer first, dearest,” he said.

In the playful struggle that the girl made to pass the answer came, for when their hands touched they went into each other’s arms, and at that moment saw the two women at the window.

“And why,” said Lady Geraldine, moving a step towards her daughter, “cannot your son marry my child, since he loves her?”

“Because my son is dead!”

“Mother!”

“Are you mad?—what do you mean?” Lady Geraldine grasped her friend’s hand in hers as though she feared her reason. “What do you mean? Your son is before you now.

But Lady Osborne spoke in a dull, slow voice, pointing to the youth who stood looking her so bewildered.

“My child has been dead, oh, so many years. He lies a baby’s length in his little, forgotten grave. That boy who stands there—who would to-morrow possess the broad lands of the Osborne family as my heir—who would then, also, be betrothed to your daughter Enid, only heir to your proud name, is a servant’s child.”

“Mother!” the young man cried hoarsely. My God! What are you saying? A servant’s child! I am your son.”

“You are not my son.” Lady Osborne faced him now, her eyes grown hard, thinking of the day the truth was broken to her. “A woman—the woman who nursed my son—let him die, and in his place she sent you back. Oh! everyone shall know it. You are not an Osborne; how could I ever have imagined it! Every year since she told the truth to me I have seen your inheritances coming out in you—your love for the lower classes—your——”

“Hush!” The young man faced her. “Since I am not your son, who is my—mother?”

“I do not remember her name—you are a servant’s child—a servant’s child.”

The young man staggered towards the door. Then he turned to the women again, his arms outstretched.

“Mother!”

No response.

“Sweetheart!”

But the girl had moved to her mother’s side, and the mother had her arms around her. “A servant’s child,” they whispered, too stunned to weep.

Then the boy turned, and without a word left the room. When the door slammed the girl drew herself from her mother’s side, as though waking from a sleep.

“Where is he?” she cried. “What have you done to him? Why did you not give me time to think? I love him; I do not care what he is; I love him!” She staggered blindly across the room, calling to him to come back, but before she could open the door she fell in a swoon before it.

IV

Lady Osborne and her guests came white and weary from their rooms the following morning. The glad village bells filled the parks with their music. In a few hours the villagers would surround the house, happy in their holiday dress, and eager to give their congratulations at the coming of age of the young heir of the Osborne estate. The three women sat silent around the breakfast-table, making a pretence of eating, but eating nothing. The fourth place at the table was still unfilled—the seat placed to-day at the head for the heir. Some silly servant had laid on his plate a white rose, and beside it were a heap of congratulatory letters and telegrams.

The girl was the only one to call attention to the empty place. In a firm voice she asked where the young heir was.

A servant answered that he had not been in his room all night; he must have gone out at dawn, perhaps to shoot. Anyway, he had not been seen.

After that there was no more said, and when the time had arrived for the demonstration the three pale women went out upon the balcony, Lady Osborne going first, the two others following.

“What are you going to do? You are going to do something?” the girl whispered.

“I am going to tell the people the truth.” The girl spoke angrily,—

“All these years he has not known a mother’s love. What if he asks you why you robbed him of that? Even if she was poor, she would have held him to her, shielded him, loved him.”

“She deserted him,” Lady Osborne sneered.

“All the more reason for us women to love him; he is noble and good. Did he not win your heart as a little, soft baby? Think of him as he was, and love him.”

“I shall do my duty as I know it. I shall tell the people the truth.”

The girl said no more, but stood aside. In her heart she thought, “If you cast him off, I will claim him here, in the face of them all.”

The air was loud with the sound of glad voices, and soon the avenue was gay with bright-coloured gowns and cheery faces. All the village, old and young, had come to make a holiday within the park’s hospitable gates. The servants of the hall had laid, unchecked, great tables of food and ale for the village guests. They came singing and laughing to the front of the house, and, seeing the mistress Upon the balcony, they called for cheers for her. She faced them, white and unsmiling. Some, seeing her expression, remained silent. She raised her hand for quiet as they crowded before her.

“Before you go to your games and feasting,” she said, “there is something I must say to you. The young heir”——the people cheered at the mention of him.

“The young man whom you know as my son——” But she saw the crowd was not listening. On the outskirts there was some disturbance, and those nearer were asking what it was, and what was wrong. She thought she heard some one beg her to go aside; then the crowd parted, making a lane, through which she saw a crowd of men approaching.

“The young heir, whom you knew as my son——” She raised her voice, then saw what was coming. The men were carrying something; they were bringing it to her. A friend tried to pull her away, but she would not move. Then the men came to where she stood, and laid their burden down before her—drowned, white, cold—the other woman’s child! She started forward, as though to take the body in her arms ; then with a strong effort controlled herself She laid her hand instead upon his wet forehead, and heard a girl’s heart-broken scream behind her. “Take Miss Geraldine away,” she said. “What has happened?”

The men told her they had found the body in the river—it must have been there all night. They were honest fellows, and spoke with a sob in their throats; but Lady Osborne did not cry. “My child,” she whispered, “had no mother to weep over him. Neither shall this. My child, unhonoured, was buried away. So shall this one be.” She bent, and took one of the limp hands in hers.

“You fought hard for your life,” she said, looking at the torn and blood-marked fingers; “fought hard. You were a coward to go from your troubles, and a coward to seek to get back from the death you feared more. Never an Osborne!—never an Osborne!” She raised her eyes from the still face, and there, in the gaping, horrified crowd, she saw the face of the woman who had given her all her trouble.

“Come here!” she called; and the frightened woman came.

“I am in your place,” Lady Osborne said. “Take back your son.”

The woman, with a frightened cry, flung herself at the lady’s feet.

“You scorned me and maddened me till I spoke,” she groaned.

“Take away your son!”

The woman, white as death, rose before her.

“I lied to you,” she said; “it was my baby that died. This is your child!”