

# JEANNE OF THE MARSHES

## A Story of Love and Mystery

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

SYNOPSIS—Jeanne LeMesurier and her stepmother, Princess Ena, accompanied by Major Forrest and Lord Ronald Engleton, visit Cecil de la Borne at Red Hall, his Norfolk home. Cecil's elder brother, Andrew, who dislikes fashionable society, takes the hint and retires before their appearance. The Princess and Major Forrest are really card sharps looking for a victim.

HE turned from the Princess, who was not greatly interested, to find that for once he had succeeded in riveting the attention of the girl, whose general attitude towards him and the whole world seemed to be one of barely tolerant indifference.

"I should like to see over your house, Mr. De la Borne," she said. "It all sounds very interesting."

"I am afraid," he answered, "that your interest would not survive very long. We have no treasures left, nor anything worth looking at. For generations the De la Borne have stripped their house and sold their lands to hold their own in the world. I am the last of my race, and there is nothing left for me to sell," he declared, with a momentary bitterness.

"Hadden't you—a half brother?" the Princess asked. Cecil hesitated for a moment. He had drifted so easily into the position of head of the house. It was so natural. He felt that he filled the place so perfectly.

"I have," he admitted, "but he counts, I am sorry to say, for very little. You are never likely to come across him—nor any other civilized person."

There was a subtle indication in his tone of a desire not to pursue the subject. His guests naturally respected it. There was a moment's silence. Then Cecil once more leaned forward. He hesitated for a moment, even after his lips had parted, as though for some reason he were inclined, after all, to remain silent, but the consciousness that every one was looking at him and expecting him to speak induced him to continue with what, after all, he had suddenly, for no explicit reason, hesitated to say.

"You spoke, Miss Le Mesurier," he began, "of looking over the house, and, as I told you, there is very little in it worth seeing. And yet I can show you something, not in the house itself, but connected with it, which you might find interesting."

The Princess leaned forward in her chair.

"This sounds so interesting," she murmured. "What is it, Cecil? A haunted chamber?"

"Something far more tangible," he answered, "although in its way quite as remarkable. Hundreds of years ago, smuggling on this coast was not only a means of livelihood for the poor, but the diversion of the rich. I had an ancestor who became very notorious. His name seems to have been a by-word, although he was never caught, or if he was caught, never punished. He built a subterranean way underneath the grounds, leading from the house right to the mouth of one of the creeks. The passage still exists, with great cellars for storing smuggled goods, and a room where the smugglers used to meet.

Jeanne looked at him with parted lips.

"You can show me this?" she asked—"the passage and the cellars?"

Cecil nodded.

"I can," he answered. Quite a weird place it is, too. The walls are damp, and the cellars themselves are like the vaults of a cathedral. All the time at high tide you can hear the sea thundering over your head. To-morrow, if you like, we will get torches and explore them."

"I should love to," Jeanne declared. "Can you get out now at the other end?"

Cecil nodded.

"The passage," he said, "starts from a room which was once the library, and ends half-way up the only piece of cliff there is. It is about thirty feet from the ground, but they had a sort of apparatus for pulling up the barrels, and a rope ladder for the men. The preventive officers would see the boat come up the creek, and would march down from the village, only to find it empty. Of course, they suspected where the things went, but they could not prove it, and as my ancestor was a magistrate and an important man, they did not dare to search the house."

The Princess sighed gently.

"Those were the days," she murmured, "in which it must have been worth while to live. Things happened then. To-day your ancestor would simply have been called a thief."

"As a matter of fact," Cecil remarked, "I do not think that he himself benefited a penny by any of his exploits. It was simply the love of adventure which led him into it."

"Even if he did," Major Forrest remarked, "that same predatory instinct is alive to-day in another guise. The whole world is preying upon one another. We are thieves, all of us, to the tips of our finger-nails, only our roguery is conducted with due regard to the law."

The Princess smiled faintly as she glanced across the table at the speaker.



"I am afraid," she said, with a little sigh, "that you are right. I do not think that we have really improved with the centuries. My own ancestors sacked towns and held the inhabitants to ransom. To-day I sit down to bridge opposite a man with a well-filled purse, and my one idea is to lighten it. Nothing, I am convinced, but the fear of being found out, keeps us reasonably moral."

"If we go on talking like this," Lord Ronald remarked, "we shall make Miss Le Mesurier nervous. She will feel that we, and the whole of the rest of the world, have our eyes upon her money-bags."

"I am absolutely safe," Jeanne answered smiling. "I do not play bridge, and even my signature would be of no use to anyone yet."

"But you might imagine us," Lord Ronald continued, "waiting around breathlessly until the happy time arrived when you were of age, and we could pursue our diabolical schemes."

Jeanne shook her head.

"You cannot frighten me, Lord Ronald," she said. "I feel safe from every one. I am only longing for to-morrow, for a

chance to explore with you this wonderful subterranean passage."

"I am afraid," their host remarked, "that you will be disappointed. With the passing of smuggling, the romance of the thing seems to have died. There is nothing now to look at but mouldy walls, a bare room, and any amount of the most hideous fungi. I can promise you that when you have been there for a few minutes, your only desire will be to escape."

"I am not so sure," the girl answered. "I think that associations always have an effect on me. I can imagine how one might wait there, near the entrance, hear the soft swish of the oars, look down and see the smugglers, hear perhaps the muffled tramp of men marching from the village. Fancy how breathless it must have been, the excitement, the fear of being caught."

Cecil curled his slight moustache dubiously.

"If you can feel all that in my little bit of underground world," he said, "I shall think that you are even a more wonderful person."

He dropped his voice and leaned toward her, but Jeanne laughed in his face and interrupted him.

"People who own things," she remarked, "never look upon them with proper reverence. Don't you see that my mother is dying for some bridge?"



### CHAPTER V.

FLOTSAM AND JETSAM

THE Princess was only obeying a faint sign from Forrest. She leaned forward and addressed her host.

"It isn't a bad idea," she declared. "Where are we going to play bridge, Cecil? In some smaller room, I hope. This one is really beginning to get on my nerves a little. There is an ancestor exactly opposite who has fixed me with a luminous and a disapproving eye. And the blank spaces on the wall! Ugh! I feel like a Goth. We are too modern for this place, Cecil."

Their host laughed as he rose up and turned towards Jeanne. "Your mother," he said, "is beginning to be conscious of her environment. I know exactly how she is feeling, for I myself am a constant sufferer. Are you, too, sighing for the gilded salons of civilization?"

"Not in the least," Jeanne answered frankly. "I am tired of mirrors and electric lights and babble. I prefer our present surroundings, and I should not mind at all if some of those disapproving ancestors of yours stepped out of their frames and took their places with us here."

Cecil laughed.

"If they have been listening to our conversation," he said, "I think that they will stay where they are. Like royalty," he continued, "we can boast an octagonal chamber. I fear that its glories are of the past, but it is at least small, and the wall-paper is modern. I have ordered coffee and the card tables there. Shall we go?"

He led the way out of the gloomy room, chilly and bare, yet in a way magnificent still with its reminiscences of past splendour, across the hall, modernized with rugs and recent furnishings, into a smaller apartment, where cheerfulness reigned. A wood fire burned in an open grate. Lamps, and a fine candelabrum, gave a sufficiency of light. The furniture, though old, was graceful, and of French design. It had been the sitting chamber of the ladies of the De la Borne family for generations, and it bore traces of its gentler occupation. One thing alone remained of primevalism to remind them of their closer contact with the great forces of nature. The chamber was built in the tower, which stood exposed to the sea, and the roar of the wind was ceaseless.

"Here at least we shall be comfortable, I think," Cecil remarked as they all entered. "My frescoes are faded, but they represent flowers, not faces. There are no eyes to stare at you from out of the walls here, Princess."

The Princess laughed gaily as she seated herself before a Louis Quinze card table, and threw a pack of cards across the faded green baize cloth.

"It is charming, this," she declared. "Shall we challenge these two boys, Nigel? You are the only man who understands my leads, and who does not scold me for my declarations."

"I am perfectly willing," Forrest answered smoothly. "Shall we cut for deal?"

Cecil de la Borne leaned over and turned up a card.

"I am quite content," he remarked. "What do you say, Engleton?"

Engleton hesitated for a moment. The Princess turned and looked at him. He was standing upon the hearthrug smoking, his face as expressionless as ever.

"Let us cut for partners," he drawled. "I am afraid of the Princess and Forrest. The last time I found them a quite invincible couple."

There was a moment's silence. The Princess glanced toward Forrest, who only shrugged his shoulders.

"Just as you will," he answered.

He turned up an ace and the Princess a three.

"After all," he remarked with a smile, "it seems as though fate were going to link us together."

"I am not so sure," Cecil de la Borne said, also throwing down an ace. "It depends now upon Engleton."

Engleton came to the table, and drew a card at random from the pack. Forrest's eyes seemed to narrow a little as he looked down at it. Engleton had drawn another ace.

"Forrest and I," he remarked. "Jolly low cutting, too. I have played against you often, Forrest, but I think this is our first rubber together. Here's good luck to us!"

He tossed off his liqueur and sat down. They cut again for deal, and the game proceeded.

Jeanne had moved across towards the window, and laid her fingers upon the heavy curtains. Cecil de la Borne, who was dummy, got up and stood by her side.

"Do you know," she said, "although your frescoes are flowers, I feel that there are eyes in this room, too, only that

