

She avoided looking at him, and for a little while she did not speak.

Mike broke the silence.

"I mustn't stop; Beauty isn't good at standing, you know, but—I felt I must come here first. I saw it in the paper—and they don't know. I—I thought the Rector would tell them. But if he's ill—"

Norah looked at him with sweet, friendly eyes which were dim with tears.

"I think it will be best, dear, to keep it to ourselves to-night. There will be time enough to grieve in. Let them get their rest. I will tell father the first thing in the morning, and if they have not heard by then he will break it to them. You needn't see your mother to-night, need you?"

"I expect she'll be keeping awake for me, and if not there's the father?"

"Yes."

Norah puckered her brow for a minute. Then she said—"Why not tell Richards to drive on? He can send a message to the house that you had had to call here a minute and are walking up. They'll think nothing of that; they will naturally suppose, after sitting so long, you are glad of a little walk, and they won't wait up for you. It isn't as if you were coming home after a long absence."

Mike was grateful for her common-sense. Norah had always been such a helpful little woman when there was any difficulty in the way. He went out and told Richards to go home, saying he would not want anyone to wait up for him. Then he returned to the study. It was empty. Norah had slipped away to the kitchen to bring him such refreshment as she could obtain at short notice. Fortunately there was generally some little delicacy in the house in readiness for one or other of Norah's *protégés*. Without compunction she warmed up old Mrs. Crook's chicken broth and carried it to him. Everything Norah did was done quietly, and without fuss. Her gentle movements disturbed no one, not even her father, whose bedroom, because he needed warmth, was over the kitchen. Her restful manner and the absence of excitement with which she received the news, though she had, as he could see, been crying when she returned to him, did much to calm himself, and when he had drunk the soup they sat a little while talking as if they had been brother and sister, of the sorrow which had come so suddenly to them all.

"You have done me so much good, Norah," said Mike when he rose to go. "I feel I can face things better now, though I dread to think of to-morrow."

"You will have strength for to-morrow when it comes, Mike," said Norah. "You will try and sleep to-night."

"I am not likely to do that; nor you either, I am afraid. I've been a selfish brute to trouble you like this."

She smiled through her tears.

"I am glad you came," she said simply, and as he looked at the pure, earnest, kind, little face, a sudden feeling of reverence made him take the hand which had ministered to him and raise it to his lips.

Michael was right in thinking Norah would not sleep. She went up to her little white bedroom and, drawing up the blind, knelt long by her window. The moon had risen, and through the trees she could see the Hall. She prayed for all within it, her heart going out in love and sympathy, not only to Mike and Lady Anstruther, but also to poor Sir John. He cared for so few people, it was hard indeed for him to part with any of them, and he was without the hope in the blessed future when the tears should be wiped from all eyes which gives comfort to those that mourn as Christians. But it was chiefly of Mike that Nora thought. He would be the heir now. The future would be changed for him. And then she laid her cheek against the hand he had kissed and knelt on in the moonlight, silent and thoughtful, looking, though she knew it not, the ideal of pure and loving and sanctified girlhood. When at length she lay down on her bed it was to remain wakeful still, dreaming and praying, with her hands folded across her breast and her eyes gazing out through the uncurtained window till the moonlight faded into the dawn and the birds awakened to a new day. Then she rose with them and prepared herself to meet it.

She made some tea for her father and carried it to his room. His neuralgia was better and he had slept well. She was glad she had not disturbed him, but she felt she ought not to keep the news of Geoffrey's death from him any longer. He was only less grieved than if it had been one of his own boys that had been taken. Of course there had always been this possibility before the young soldier, and he knew, although she said little, of Lady Anstruther's fears. Alas, that they should have been so soon realised! Norah told him of Mike's desire that he should go to his parents. There was little doubt now, that even if no official notice were received, they would see the news in the paper, and it would be less of a shock to have it broken to them gently than to suddenly be confronted with it as Michael had been. It was still early, the postman had not arrived. Mr. Gilman knew Sir John's habits, and Lady Anstruther would not probably see either letters or papers till she went into the breakfast-room. If he started at once he might be able to forestall the intelligence.

The butler, though too well trained to look his astonishment, marvelled what had brought the rector with so sad a face thus early. As he was informing him, in answer to his question, that no one was yet down, the postman's cart drove past.

"Marks," said the rector, "I wish to see either Sir John or Lady Anstruther before they receive their letters. I am afraid there is bad news for them."

The man's face grew grave.

"Oh, sir," he said with genuine emotion, "I hope there's nothing come to the Captain."

The Rector nodded.

"Don't mention it yet, Marks," he said.

"Not—not dead, sir?"

"I am afraid so."

"It will kill my lady," said the butler.

A message was sent to Sir John, who was in his dressing-room, begging him to say nothing to her ladyship, but to grant an interview to Mr. Gilman as soon as possible. The Rector waited for him in the library. He would have liked to see Michael, but the young man, contrary to his expectations, worn out by his emotions and tired by his journey, was sleeping heavily.

Sir John appeared, looking anxious.

"I hope there's nothing wrong, Gilman," he said, "to bring you to this unearthly hour."

He was not best pleased at having been hurried over his toilet, and was inclined to be irritable.

"There is, Sir John," said the Rector in his gentlest tones, and his voice shook. The task before him was no less hard that he himself was sorrowing.

"Sit down," said Sir John, as an excuse for sitting himself. His knees were trembling. He had not guessed what brought the Rector, but his heart sank with a foreboding of great evil. "Now, then, out with it. You know I hate beating about the bush."

And the Rector told him.

For some seconds the squire was as one turned to stone. His cheeks were ashen, his unseeing eyes stared before him, his hands stiffened, and his dry lips refused to speak. When the Rector spoke to him he did not seem to hear. Mr. Gilman, fearing for him, was on the point of going to look for a stimulant, but the squire, as if suspecting his intention, made a motion with his arm to detain him and uttered some inarticulate sound. The Rector divined that he was thinking of his wife.

"God will comfort her," he said gently.

At mention of that name there was a swift change in the squire. The blood rushed back to his face, the fire glowed in his eyes, he rose to his feet and gave a mocking laugh.

"Ah," he said, striking his hands together, "God will comfort her. Then it is well with her. Such cant may do for parsons and women. With me it is different. If there be a God He has taken my son. Your Bible tells of miracles. The dead are raised, and men see and believe. When my son is restored to me I too will believe, but not till then—not till then. I have no faith in this God of yours—and Geoffrey is dead."

And then as suddenly as the flame had leapt up it expired. The words had scarcely left his lips, and the Rector had not time to reach his side before his failing limbs refused to support him, and paralysed and senseless he fell to the ground.

The thoughts of all had gone first to the frail, delicate mother. But after all it was Sir John who was stricken almost to death. To Lady Anstruther strength was given to bear the double grief.

(To be continued.)