

there with cedar trees sloping up to the park of beech and elm trees. A line of glasshouses stretched away to the back, and the long windows of the lower floor were open to the warm September air. The drawing-room was long and low, and filled with old-fashioned furniture covered with crackling chintz that matched the apricot curtains. There was an old Broadwood piano in the corner with a gilt harp beside it, and the walls were hung with family portraits, delicate Romneys, and more robust Lelys, while every corner of the room was filled with flowers that represented long hours of toil on Geoffrey's part to have been raised at all.

Geoffrey came in while they were talking, and presently luncheon was served in the sunny dining-room.

"And what do you think of little Esther going off to Malta alone? Eh, Geoff?" she said. "I say she will marry a smart soldier before she has been there a month, and will turn up her nose at all her old friends before she comes back again."

"Esther would never do that!" said Geoffrey, cutting up his bread into tiny pieces. "I would stake my life on Esther's faithfulness."

There had been a time when Mrs. Hanmer had been terribly afraid that Esther would marry Geoffrey; now she seemed almost annoyed that there appeared no likelihood of such an event. But at this moment Geoffrey broke in.

"Esther, come and sing once more. Perhaps it will be some time before I have the chance of accompanying you again."

"Yes, do, dear!" cried Mrs. Hanmer. "You will be singing to some fine young officer's banjo in a week's time, no doubt. You will be sure to have lots of admirers on board ship."

The lid of the piano that Geoffrey held in his nervous fingers fell with a crash, and in the shock to Mrs. Hanmer's nerves she said no more.

"What will you sing, Esther?"

Geoffrey's sad eyes looked into hers, and Esther suddenly grew pale. Life was a tragedy, after all, and she had not before recognized the sorrow that one heart can lay upon another all unwittingly.

"Esther, sing that German good-bye song that you gave us when you were here last," said Mrs. Hanmer, from the comfort of the sofa and her knitting.

"Oh, no! I can't!" said the girl suddenly.

But it seemed to Geoffrey Hanmer that the parting song might touch Esther's heart into softness, and he struck the first chords.

"Sing it, please," he said, harshly. "My mother likes it."

And Esther, wonderingly, took up the first notes tremulously, then swelled into strength and song. It was a wonderful voice, said Geoffrey to himself, through teeth set rigidly to keep down the sorrow that rose in overpowering strength at the sound of that exquisite bird-like soprano.

"Es ist bestimmt in Gottes Rath
Das man vom Liebsten was man hat
Muss scheiden.
Wie wohl doch nicht im Lauf der Welt
Dem Herzen—ach so sauer fällt
Als scheiden: ja scheiden."

Were there ever such words, or such a rendering of them? And one hot tear splashed down from Geoffrey's eyes, unseen, upon the ivory keys.

"Very sweet, my love—very sweet!" said Mrs. Hanmer. "And your voice is certainly very nice. I should think it will be a great help to you in society."

"If you are thinking of going back now, Esther, I could walk with you," said poor Geoffrey, desperately, and the girl, whose eyes were bright with tears, gladly assented.

"Well, good-bye, my love, though we shall meet again before you sail," said Mrs. Hanmer. "And I hope you won't forget that beauty is deceitful, and favour is vain, and that there are nothing after all like old friends."

Esther and Geoffrey did not speak until they were outside the park, and when the girl made some attempt at praising the condition of the garden and parkland, the credit of which belonged to her companion, but the trouble of his white face checked the words on her lips.

"Esther!" he said, hoarsely, "you know what it is to me to part with you! You know that it has been my dearest wish for a long, long time to call you my wife. You were too young two years ago, and then, after our trouble, I had no right to ask any woman to marry me, or to ask her to wait for me, even! But I can't let you go now, Esther, without telling you what I feel for you! There will be lots of other men to

tell you such things when you go out to Malta, but you will never have anyone who loves and admires you so well as I do!"

"Oh, Geoffrey!" said Esther, faintly, "I am so sorry—"

"Why are you sorry? I know that you don't love me now—I have read it often enough in your eyes—but some day perhaps, when you remember my words, you may grow to love me!"

He had her hand now in his, and in the solitude of the field-path, among the trees, there seemed to be no one but they two in earth and sky.

"I am not sure what I feel—I do not know!" stammered Esther. "Oh, I wish I knew what to say!"

He looked down at her, so brave and strong and honest in his love.

"Darling!" he said, "say nothing now, for I would not have you promise anything before you are sure of yourself. But my love for you is so great that I would wait for you all my life if only you told me to hope."

Esther's lashes hid her troubled eyes. She had never thought seriously of love. Vague dreams of some happy state of which she knew nothing had come to her sometimes, sleeping or waking, and she had wondered what they meant. Geoffrey was so much a part of her life that she had not asked herself what her friendship for him signified, and even now she was uncertain.

"Oh, I don't know! I don't know! Tell me what I must say, Geoffrey!"

"You are not sure of yourself, Essie—you are not sure, and therefore your love cannot be the right sort— not what I want, or you would be certain of yourself!"

He was so brave in his disappointment that Esther felt suddenly unhappy that she could not give him the answer he needed.

"Perhaps when I go away I shall know better," she said, timidly. "You see, I have not had much experience of the world, and I am very ignorant, Geoffrey, about many things, and I am not half good enough for you—"

"You—not good enough for me! Esther, you are the most lovely and the most perfect woman I have ever met. You would be a crown to any man's life. How dare you say such things?"

A robin was singing his autumn song in the wood behind them, and the sweetness of the message touched the heart of the girl.

"Esther, will you wait, and give me your answer in three months?" pleaded Geoffrey. "You will know your own heart by then."

"Yes, I will wait for three months, and then I will write to you and answer your question," said Esther, eagerly.

"Are you sure that I am asking nothing dishonourable of you?" said Geoffrey, quickly. "I want you to know before you go away that you are perfectly free— although I am bound!"

"That sounds a very fair bargain—oh yes, a very fair bargain!" scoffed Esther, lightly. "We are both free for three months, say, rather."

But Geoffrey shook his head. "I am the captive of your eyes and your smile, Essie. I cannot—I do not wish to be free!"

Esther smiled back a little tremulously, for she was still little more than a schoolgirl, with feet timidly straying beyond the bounds of her childish life, and this sudden glimpse of the possibility of the unhappiness that a woman could make for a man frightened her, and she laid a trembling hand upon his arm.

"Oh, I want to make you happy! I do, indeed!" she said, pitifully, and suddenly the man stooped, and put his arms about her and kissed her on the lips, and in that kiss the heart of the woman, Esther Beresford, awoke.

She trembled away from him, hiding her face in her hands, and he, manlike and blind, did not see that now was the moment to ask her the question once again.

"I am sorry—I could not help it! Forgive me, Esther!" he stammered. "But I simply could not help it, you looked so lovely!"

Esther murmured something incoherent, and he dared not look at her again, fearing her displeasure, and they walked on side by side in silence to the door of the cottage.

Under the gentle influence of Mme. de la Perouse, both young people recovered their serenity; but the quick eyes of the old lady discovering that there was something tragic in the air, she gave them no opportunity to be alone together for the rest of Geoffrey's visit.

TO BE CONTINUED