

"Oh, Aunt Emily, hush! I am not hard at all," cried the girl, in a great burst of sorrow. "Life is so hard to understand I wish God would show me what to do."

Lady Emily put her arm round the drooping shoulders, with a tender caressing touch.

"I cannot bear to see you vexed, my darling. You, who have been so good to me and mine," she said, in a low, husky voice.

"I am not vexed at all, except for Will. May I go home to-night, Aunt Emily, without seeing him? I want to speak to mamma and I will come back to-morrow—"

"If you are very anxious to go, my dear, I will order the carriage at once," Lady Emily replied. "But do not, I entreat you, sacrifice your own feelings—feelings which must be sacred to you, even for the sake of Will. He has had many disappointments, one more or less can make but little difference to him now. Already I think he regrets what he has said, he is fearful of distressing you. Only this fancy took a strange hold upon him, and when he asked my advice, I thought it better that he should reveal what was in his mind to you. Perhaps I was selfish in that too. It is so hard not to think *only* of my son in these sad days."

"It was not selfish, only natural. I wish you could believe, and make Will believe, that I am neither distressed nor angry on my own account, but only for him," Evelyn answered in a low voice, and with flushed face. "How could I misjudge him? He has always been so good. If—if it will make him happier, perhaps I ought to grant what he asks. It would be no hardship to me to be called by his name, and to have a closer right to watch by him to the end. By to-morrow, I think, after I have spoken to mamma, I shall know just what to do. To-morrow I shall come back in any case."

Lady Emily looked at the girl in simple wonder. She was so calm, so simple, so direct in her ideas, and her expression of them. There was no shirking the question, no obtrusion of her own feelings, only a quiet and brave consideration of the whole matter in its serious light, a desire to decide what would be best for all. It was the most wonderful thing Emily had met with in her life, but one could not at the moment express a tithe of what she felt.

Clement and his mother were lingering a few moments in the drawing-room after their return from Winterdyne, where they had been dining, when the rumble of wheels disturbed them.

"That will be a carriage from Studleigh, Clem," Rachel said, in quick alarm. "Your cousin must be here. I wish I had gone over to-day instead of to Winterdyne. I have been thinking so much of them all day."

Before Clement could reply, they heard a light footfall on the corridor, and the next moment Evelyn entered the room.

"What has happened, Evy? Is Will gone?" asked Clement, quickly.

"No, Will is no worse. I wanted to see mamma, and Aunt Emily sent the carriage with me. It is to stay here and take me over in the morning. Will you see about it, Clem, please? The man is waiting."

Clement looked genuinely surprised, and felt that there was something he could not understand. But he went off obediently to see that the man and his horses were accommodated for the night. Then Evelyn turned to her mother with a little, weary smile.

"Let us go upstairs, mamma, before Clem comes back. I have a great deal to say to you. I am very unhappy and perplexed. I don't know what I should do, and I know you will help me. Aunt Emily knew it too, so she let me come at once."

It was about fifteen minutes before Clem returned to the house, and he looked round the empty drawing-room in blank dismay, feeling rather aggrieved that it should be empty. He lingered about in the hall for a little and when no sound reached him from upstairs, he went into the smoking-room and lit his pipe. It seemed to him that he had been smoking for more than an hour, when he heard a step on the stairs, and his mother's voice—

"Are you there, Clem?"

"Yes, mother, here, and jolly glad to see you," he answered promptly. "What's up? Has Evy quarrelled with the old lady? I'm not a bit surprised. Why, what's up?"

The last words fell abruptly from his lips when he saw the exceeding paleness of his mother's face. She entered the smoking-room and shut the door:

"Evy is not coming down. A very strange thing has happened. Will has asked her to marry him."

"What! Oh, impossible. Isn't he dying? or is he getting better? What does it mean?"

"He is not getting better. Sit down, dear, and I will try and explain it to you."

But Clem did not sit down. He wandered up and down the room, pipe in hand, while his mother in a few brief words told him what had occurred.

"And do you mean to say, mother, that Evy for one moment would think of such a thing?" he asked, blankly.

"She is thinking of it. She is a very curious girl, Clem. Things lay hold upon her and weigh upon her heart."

"But, mother, so soon after poor Raybourne; it's monstrous I don't understand her."

"I do. It could not harm poor Raybourne, Clement though Evelyn should be called your cousin's wife a few hours before his death. That is not what concerns me. It is the future. It is hardly to be expected that Evelyn's life is to end just here. She is very young, and many other chances of happiness might come to her. I confess I am unable to advise her."

"This appears to me to be a matter easily enough settled. It is Will's mother, I believe, a selfish old woman, who thinks of nothing outside her own four walls. She is urging Evelyn on to this absurd sacrifice, but I shall not permit it!" said Clem, hotly.

"Hush, dear. You wrong your Aunt. She is not anxious for it, but the reverse."

"Then poor Will—poor fellow, I am sorry for him—must have become weakened in mind by his illness. In health I know he would be the very last man to ask such a sacrifice at the hands of any woman. Do you mean to say, mother, that you have any doubt in the matter? Why, what good would it do to the living or the dead? I never heard of a more absurd or senseless proposal in my life."

"Poor Will's motives are of the most unselfish, dear," his mother reminded him, quietly. "We must leave Evelyn alone. She is not one to be easily influenced. I have never known so young a woman with such capabilities of decision. We must leave her alone."

"I cannot. I will not permit it," Clement reiterated. "I will see Will myself if it cannot be prevented any other way."

Rachel shook her head, and faintly smiled. Her children were a little beyond her now; the time had gone for her to say—Do this! and it was done. Her sympathies in this matter were strangely divided. There was something weirdly pathetic in the idea of Will's life-long and hopeless love at last asserting itself and claiming recognition. What she said of Evelyn was absolutely true; and though in the morning Clement tried to reason with his sister, she would give him no satisfaction, and he felt that he was speaking in vain. Poor Clement was in sore distress. The memory of his friend and comrade was so fresh in his heart that the very idea that Evelyn should entertain a thought of supplanting that memory all seemed like perfect sacrilege. It weighed upon him so much that after the early lunch he mounted his horse and followed his mother and sister to Studleigh. When he was shown up to his cousin's room, and saw his face, all his anger died away.

"Come away, old fellow, it seems ages since I saw you. Have you come to slay me with that ominous-looking sword of yours?" Will said, with a bright, unruffled smile. "Now, I have seen everybody I want to see to-day except Evelyn."

"Has she not been here? She left Stonecroft in a great hurry this morning," said Clement, bluntly.

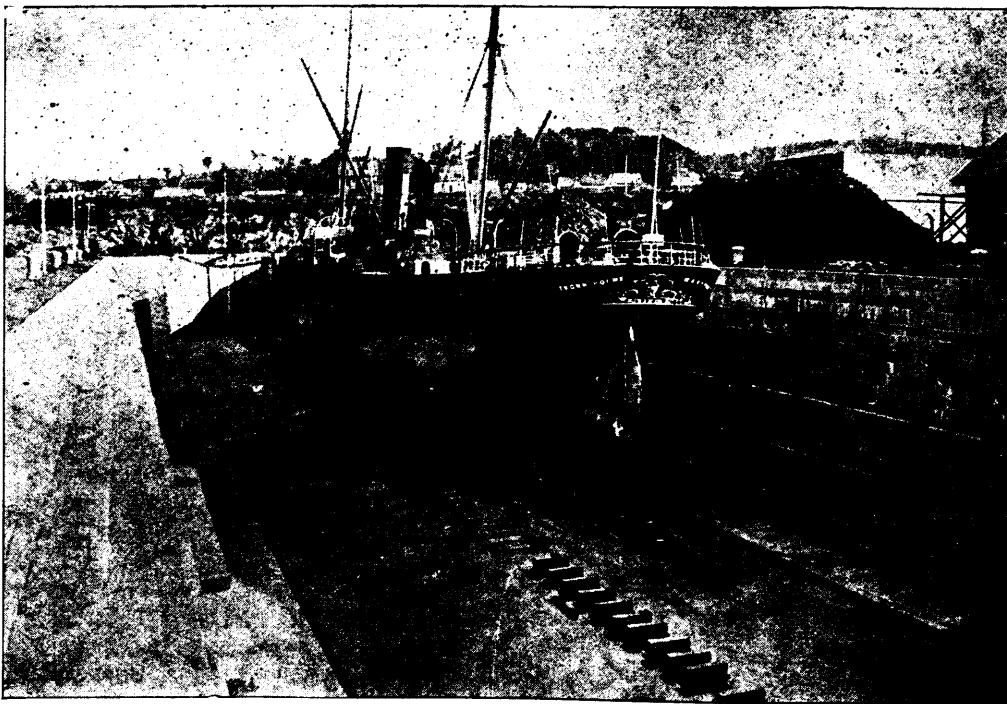
"Not yet; though I know she has come back. Aunt Rachel has just gone out. What a great, splendid fellow you are, Clem! It makes me feel strong to look at you."

The tears sprang hot and bright into Clem's honest eyes, and his heart smote him for his bitter thoughts of his cousin. He felt, after all, that if the granting of his request was to make his closing hours happier and brighter, it could be no such terrible sacrifice, but rather, especially to the woman who made it, something of a privilege. He sat down very meek and quiet by his cousin's side, and Will, looking up at him, read his every thought just as easily as if it had been written on an open page. But the subject was never mentioned between them.

It was at sunset that day before Evelyn came to her cousin's room. She opened the door softly, and was beside him before he was aware of her entrance. The red flush mounted to his cheek when he looked round and saw the expression of her face.

"I have come back, dear Will," was all she said; "and if you like I will never leave you any more."

(To be Continued.)



QUEBEC DRY DOCK.