

Dane however had scruples. He looked at Wych Hazel, and though his grey eyes were all afire with purpose and spirit, he pursed up his lips with a low whistle and getting up from his chair took a turn or two through the large room. Finally came and stood before Wych Hazel.

"What is the cost of that dress you have on," said he. "I mean by the yard?"

"This? I have no idea. I order what I like, and pay the bills when they come. What was the use of information with which I could do nothing?" But the colour started again.

We shall have to get the bills, then, before we can go on. If you have kept them, that is."

"Do you mean," she said, looking up at him rather wistfully now, "that I am *always* what you call extravagant?"

"Never, that I know of," said he smiling at her. "To be extravagant, is to go beyond bounds; and one who has never been conscious of the bounds, cannot be justly said to have done that."

"One ought to be conscious of proper bounds," said Hazel, as if she were a good deal disappointed in herself.

"You are only just beginning to be conscious of anything," said Dane audaciously.

"Statements—I cannot think how you find time to get them all up. Well, Mr. Rollo? what next?"

"I should like to know how soon you are going to let me come home," said he, sitting down by her.

In an instant Hazel was absolutely still, even to the ends of the small fingers that lay folded in her lap, peeping out from the broad lace shadows. And, nicely timed for her, the tea bugle just then rang out, and the door of the red room opened to admit Dingee and the tea tray; with cold patridge, and salad, and delicate loaves of bread, white and brown, and wonderful cake, and a shape of Mrs. Bywank's own special quince jelly. Hazel sprang up to superintend and give directions; but when the little table was spread and wheeled up, she dismissed Dingee and went to making the tea herself.

"I often have tea here when I am alone," she said,—"I mean, when Mr. Falkirk does not come. And I thought perhaps you would like it too."

"Very much," returned Dane demurely. "So much that I am impatient for it to become a stated fact. How long do you mean to keep me at Gyda's?"

"You have such a peculiar way of putting questions," said Hazel, emulating the composure in everything but her face. "Never wording them so they can be answered. And there is no use in disturbing them ages beforehand. Shall I give you coffee, Mr. Rollo?"

"You are under a mistake. I am not going to be an age at Gyda's."

"Well—then Gyda will be disappointed."

"And you?"

"You know you always have sufficient force of character to disappoint me easily."

"Have I? Would it disappoint you very much if I proposed to be married at Christmas?"

"In that case," answered Miss Wych, "the force of character would be on my side, and the disappointment on yours."

"May I ask your views?" said Dane, with a coolness that was provoking.

"Ah, be quiet!" said Hazel in desperation, "you are perplexing all my ideas. Is it five lumps of sugar—or six—that go in when you have control of the sugar bowl?"

"The question is, just now, how many go in when you have the control?" But then he let the supper take its course for a while in commonplace peace.

"I wonder," Wych Hazel began suddenly, her thoughts flying back to the talk before tea, "I was thinking—I have thought very often,—how many things you will find in me that you do not like? And how little there is you would like to find!"

A flash of eyes came to her across the table; and then Dane remarked quietly that he had thought of that a number of times. "Indeed I may say," he added, "that I am always thinking of it."

She laughed a little bit, catching his meaning, but the serious look came back.

"For instance," she said,—"all this that I spend on myself, you would—and do—spend on other people."

"I think nothing can equal my astonishment at that 'statement,' except the impossibility of answering it!"

"But I do not mean anything ridiculous," said Hazel,—"not bread and butter and partridges. At least, I don't know about the partridges—but you understand. And I do not mean that I would not give *them* up,—only—"

"Did I convey the impression that I wished you to give up partridges?"

"Yes—if somebody else wanted them more," said Hazel. "And I am willing enough. But then, but then—I wish you knew," she said, rising abruptly as Dingee came in to clear the table. "I wish I could tell you."

CHAPTER XV.

CONFIDENTIAL TALK.

Dane waited till Dingee's services had been performed and the door was closed behind him again; then came beside Wych Hazel where she was standing and drew her within his arm.

"What do you wish you could tell me, Hazel?" he said, with the tenderness of eye and voice which, with him, came instead of exple-

tives of endearment. There was a faint quiver of the lips that answered,

"Things—about me, that you ought to know. And it is very hard to tell you some things, Mr. Rollo."

"It would be easier if you could call me something else," he said, bending to kiss her. "I should like to know anything about you. What are these 'things'?"

"My thoughts—and life. And I cannot tell them without saying so much—that I would not say, and, maybe, ought not. Only, when you begin to start questions, and subjects,—then—"

Hazel paused to gather her forces. "Then I think it is right you should know everything about me, first." The last word came out very low, and even the instinct of truth could hardly have carried her further just then.

"Go on, and tell me," said Dane gently. "The words are as sweet to me as a chime of bells; but, just yet, not so intelligible."

She stood very still for a minute, her head bent down. Then softly disengaged herself.

"I cannot talk to you so," she said. "Sit down, please, in this bergère, and let me sit here; and I will tell—what I can."

"Here" meant a low foot cushion near the bergère, where the young lady placed herself, but a little drawn back and turned away, where only the firelight could look in her face.

"Stop!"—said Dane, arresting this part of the arrangements. "You at my feet!"

"Yes, if I like it," said Hazel. "When you have to gainsay people in great things, you should always let them have their way in small."

She got up and crossed over to the fire, replacing a brand that had fallen down; came back to her cushion and sat there a minute with her hands folded.

"A year ago," she said, "when you drove home with me from Moscheloo,—you had no new views, Mr. Rollo. None in practice. In a sense, you and I were on the same ground."

"Well?"—said he, a little anxiously.

"Then in the winter,—I partly guessed first from Dr. Maryland's words what you told me,—in effect, yourself. And at first I liked it,—I thought I was glad."

"At first?"—echoed Rollo.

"At first," Hazel repeated. "It suited me, to have you take the highest stand you could, and Mrs. Coles stirred up enough antagonism to keep me from knowing that I was anything but glad."

"Why should you be anything but glad?" said Dane, in tones which did not reveal the surprise which was growing upon him.

"I did not know that I was—until you came. Mr. Falkirk kept up the antagonism, and I had not much time to think. But when you came—"

She hesitated a little, then went steadily on. It was so like Hazel, to do what she had to do, if it took her through fire and water!—"I had left you standing in one place," she said, "and you had moved quite away to another. And I knew—that standing there—you would never have seen me."

"That is a conclusion you have no right to," said Dane calmly.

"No matter—it is true. Your eyes would have been set for other things, and your appreciation would have been all changed and different. I knew it then, that night. You talked of things I but half understood, and your face was all shining with a light that did not fall on me. And partly it mortified me,—I was used to having at least some vantage ground; and partly it brought back the old loneliness, which had—perhaps—just a little bit gone away. Then you left me a lesson."

Dane sat where she had desired him, but leaning down towards her, listening and looking very gravely and intently. "Yes," he answered; "and you studied it."

"I tried." The words came rather faintly.

"And that was where the tangle began."

"What made the tangle?"

"Because—because the lesson and you were all wrapped up together. And I could never study it without—studying you. And so—so it came,"—she drew her breath a little, holding her fingers tight,—"that before I *could* know much about that—I had to decide something else—definitely—first."

Certainly some things are hard to tell!

"Well, you *did* decide something else definitely," said Dane, with most delightful matter-of-fact gravity of manner, not seeming to recognize her difficulty at all.

"Then the tangle grew worse," said Hazel.

"I used to think I was trying to be interested, or trying to understand, or trying to do, just to please you, or because you would like me better. And besides—"

"Well—it would not have been very wicked if that had been partly true."

"No," said Hazel,—"but then the work would not have been real; and I never could tell. And besides," she went on again, "you did not come, and I did not hear,—and it did not suit me to be always thinking about you—and I tried to put the whole thing out of my head."

"Did I make a mistake then?" said Rollo.

"But I found I could not bear very well to meet you on the neutral ground of that year. I was waiting."

"Yes. I was not speaking of that," she said.

"When you take such a tangle into society, it ties itself into twenty new knots. That is all that need be said of the summer and spring. Then I came home."

"And then I made a mistake," said Dane.

"You need not tell me that."

She sighed a little, answering to another point.

"You could not know that you had started all the old questions again, and that I thought it was maybe your changed point of view—that made it so easy for you to give it up."

"But why do you recall all this now, Hazel?" asked Dane, very quietly. "I never gave you up; it was a fancied somebody that was not you."

"It came in the course of my story. I could not pass it. Only for that," she said, turning her face towards him for a moment. "Because then, in some of those days, I thought—perhaps—I had learned the lesson you set me."

"And you do not think so now?"

"I am not sure that it was true work," she answered slowly. "For in a storm one flies to shelter,—and just then my hands sought anything that could stand and would not change. But now—"

Dane was proverbially scarce a patient man after a certain line was passed. He left his chair now, stooped and took Hazel's hands and gently pulled her up from her low cushion; and then took her in his arms and held her close.

"I understand all about it," he said. "You need not try to tell me any more. My little Wych!—Look here; there are just two things to be said, one mediate, the other immediate. In the first place, no uncertainty of motives need embarrass or delay your action in a course that you know to be right. In the next place,—Hazel,—don't you see, that when we have been married a while and I am become an old story, I shall be more of a help and less of a hindrance? And I know all about you; and I don't know it a bit better after all this long exposition than I did before. And if I have changed my standpoint relatively to some things, I have never changed it respecting you, except to draw nearer. Now confess you have been a foolish child."

The soft laugh which answered him had more than shyness to make it unsteady.

"I do not suppose you want to change me for anybody else," she said. "But I do not want you to think I am anybody else."

There came just then rapid hoof-beats round the house, and in a minute more Dingee presented himself in the red room, bearing a request that Mr. Rollo would come to the side door for a moment, to see Dr. Arthur Maryland.

CHAPTER XVI.

DR. ARTHUR'S NEWS.

"The doctor was on horseback, but standing a little way off from the steps."

"Stay where you are—" he said, speaking low however, "Dane, there is ship fever among those Swedes that have just come to the Hollow."

"The Schiffers."

"Yes. I was not certain till to-night, but I have been all day taking precautions and making arrangements, and could not get away a minute sooner. I was afraid you might miss a message; and I would not write notes there to be opened here. Now I cannot stop to talk, but if you will send me general orders every morning for men and business in the Hollow, I will see them carried out. Good-night.—My respects to her Grace."

"Stop—Arthur!" said the other as he was moving off—"I shall be there presently."

"On no account!" said Dr. Arthur wheeling round. "I am too glad that you were here to-day. Always depute that part of your work which somebody else can do."

"I will be there, Arthur, in an hour or two. Go on—you had better not wait for me."

Dr. Arthur sat still a minute, looking down between his horse's ears.

"Well," he said,—"perhaps it is none of my business,—but do you know what a sensitive plant you have to deal with in there? She must not have another shock like that mysterious one of a month ago. Good-night!"

With a somewhat slow step, Rollo left the hall door and went back to the red room. But his face shewed no change to disturb Wych Hazel. He came back first to the fire, and somewhat thoughtfully, quite silently, put it in order. By that time he was ready. He faced Wych Hazel, and spoke in his ordinary tone.

"I am glad to have had this day, Wych,—and I am glad we have had our talk this evening: for I find we cannot have another in some time."

"You are going away?" she said, rising and coming towards him. "One of your business trips? Then this will be my time for a few days in town, to 'do about dress' a little. Do you suppose—honestly—that anybody wants my new gloves?" The question came with a laugh and a flash which yet did not hide it. But silently Dane folded his two arms about her and pressed kiss after kiss upon her brow and lips. That shewed feeling more than he meant to shew it. Yet when he spoke his tone was clear and sweet, no shadow at all in it.

"I am not going away."

She drew off as far as she could, to look at him, with sudden instinctive fear. Only her eyes put questions now.

"Yes," he said,—"there is sickness in the Hollow. And it is contagious sickness."

"O, is there?"—with a grave look which yet told more of relief than concern. "And you are going to help Dr. Arthur take care of them?"

He answered absently, looking at her, as a man might who expected to lose such an indulgence for some time to come. Her face was very thoughtful for a minute; then she looked up with almost a smile.

"Yes," she repeated,—"of course you must. Well, I am ready."

"Are you?" said he. "For what?"

"You think I do not know enough," said Hazel with some eagerness; "and I do not know much; but I can follow directions. And Bye declares she was never so taken care of in her life as once by me."

Instead of answering, at first, Dane clasped her closer in his arms and kissed her, as if in anticipation of the hunger for the sight of her which would shortly set in.

"I should like to have you take care of me," he said at length. "If I needed a little care, that is."

"Well," said Wych Hazel, "you may put it so, if you like. You will need a great deal before you have been in that Hollow two days."

"Need it. Do you think you can give it?" said he wistfully.

"Without a doubt."

"But you are not my wife, Wych—you cannot be there with me now. And if you were my wife, you could not. Do you think I would let you?"

She shrank back a little, hanging her head. This view of the case had certainly not come up.

"I thought—I suppose—anybody may come and go to see sick people," she said under her breath. "I thought, anybody might stay with them. And I think so now. I never heard of etiquette over small-pox."

"You could not 'come and go' to these people. I shall establish a strict quarantine, and probably be in it myself. You must not come even near the Hollow."

"But I need not have anything to do with you," pleaded Hazel. "I am going to serve under Dr. Arthur."

"That is just my place."

"You may keep it," said Hazel. "A woman's place is not solid and stationary like a man's. Nobody will know where I am, but some poor sick child that everyone else is too busy for."

Perhaps Dane smothered a sigh; but he only said, clear and clean-cut the words were now,—

"I cannot have you there, Hazel. You must keep your place and do your own work here. The Hollow is my business."

"And you mean to leave me outside of your business?" she questioned, with eyes incredulous even yet.

"Outside of this business. And you are not to come even near the Hollow. I know you do not like to give promises, and so I do not ask for one. This is not a request. You understand?"

"Olaf!"—It was the sweetest of pleading tones. But no more words followed,—neither word nor look.

"Ah you have adopted me at last, have you?" said he. "I have been waiting for this. And the sweetness of it will be in my ears all these days before me. The next time you speak that word in such music, Hazel, I will give you what you ask."

"Not now?" she said softly. "I may not go even to Gyda's?"

"Gyda will be with me."

The words, the utterance, were cheery, clear, and sweet; at the same time strong and absolute. And Rollo wore a look which I think a woman does not dislike to see on a face she loves, even though its decisions be against her; there was sweetness enough in it, also unmanageableness! No shadow, it must be noted. If he was going into danger, and knew it, the fact did not shadow him.

Hazel stood still, struggling with herself; fighting the disappointment and the restraint; most of all, the sorrow which came in the train of the other two. For with the passing away of her own thought of going, the thought that he must go came out clear and strong. Into that infected place, to be shut up in quarantine with no one knew what! Hazel passed her hand across her forehead as if she were pushing the shadows right and left, bidding them wait.

"I wanted to ask," she said,—and then the voice changed, and suddenly the soft touch of her fingers came to his face, stroking back some lock of hair to its accustomed place. But the look was as intent and unconscious as if she never expected to see him again in all her life. And he stood still, like a man under a spell, which he would not break by the least movement.

(To be continued.)

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