

"Dear Lady Emily, do you take my advice and not trouble yourself about this matter; it will right itself," he said cheerily. "Above all, don't let our patient think that in *not* dying he has disappointed expectation. It would be too absurd. I confess I do not see much cause for anxiety. I think you are needlessly concerning yourself."

"Do either of them know the opinion you have expressed to-day regarding his condition?" she asked.

"No. I came straight down to you, because I fancied you had suffered most," said the physician, with a grave kind of sympathy which went to his listener's heart.

"I will try to be cheerful as you advise," she said, trying to smile. "After all, as you say, it is too absurd that we should feel as if we were disappointed. I do not feel so, only I can scarcely believe that I dare hope. I have suffered so much, and so long."

"But you will have your compensations now. Who knows but that one day you will hold the heir in your arms? Look at the bright side, and the rest will follow you," said the physician, cheerily, as he shook hands and went his way.

It was now nearly a month since that impressively simple marriage ceremony had taken place in the house at Studleigh; a month of curious experience for all within its walls. But, although the Squire still lingered, none had dared to hope that there was any substantial improvement in his condition, or that the end could be very long delayed. Therefore the physician's favourable verdict was something of a shock to Lady Emily. Her heart beat tumultuously as she slowly ascended the stairs after he had gone. She felt strangely excited, and now that she had realized it, almost happy. She had given him up so often—had so many times resigned herself to the inevitable—that resting on an assurance upon which she had the utmost confidence, she felt as if a new vista had been opened up to her. Something of her inward satisfaction was expressed in her beaming face when she entered her son's room, and when he somewhat languidly raised his head, he was instantly struck by it.

"Well, mother, what does Phillips say? How much longer am I to cumber the ground and wear out your patience?" he asked with a slight smile. "I hope he gave some definite satisfaction. I asked him straight out, but he 'heard me as he heard me not,' and went away. Tell me quite frankly. I can bear it."

Lady Emily crossed to her son's couch, and, sitting down by his side, laid her hand on his head.

"Ministered unto by such a mother and such a wife," he said, dreamily, "life during these lingering days has been passing sweet. Mother, I did not think dying could be made so easy. If this be dying, it is easier to die than live."

"William, tell me, have you felt no better these few days; stronger, more interested in life? I have fancied so," she said, with a visible agitation.

"I have fancied myself so, and Evelyn will try to persuade me, but that cannot be," he said, quietly.

"My son, you will live. Death is farther off than it has ever been. I have Doctor Phillip's authority for what I say," she said, tremblingly.

He looked at her for a moment with wide, questioning eyes, but his face showed no satisfaction nor happy dawn of hope.

"Mother, surely that is impossible," he said, at length, slowly, and with difficulty.

"It is true, my son. But you do not look as if I had brought you happy news of a new lease of life," she said, with a strange, wavering smile, but for a time he gave her no answer, and she, sitting silent by his side knew that he was thinking of his dearest. Strange that even that knowledge had lost its sting for the proud heart of the mother, since she had opened it to admit another love.

"You know," he said at length, turning his face once more to her, "you know that I am thinking of Evelyn. If this thing be true, what is to become of her?"

"I am thinking of that too, William," she answered with responsive gravity. "She is your wife, dear, and I feel sure that her wifely duty

will never fail you. We know that in Rachel Ayre's daughter we cannot be disappointed."

"But that for me is not enough," he said wearily, and she saw his face grow grey and pinched in the shadow. "Mother, I have done her a cruel and irreparable wrong. I cannot set her free, though, God knows, I would gladly do so. What do they mean by telling a man he is dying, by setting a limit to his days, when they know no more of life and death than the babe unborn? It seems to me that their boasted skill is of all farces the most wretched and despicable."

She sat silent, understanding and sympathising with his passionate outburst, and yet unable to utter a word of comfort. To her the situation seemed most painful, and the outlook for the happiness of her son and his wife most gloomy.

"Mother, it unmans me to think of that bright creature tied, if I live, to a wretched, broken-down life, which can be but half a life at best. Oh, it was most unnatural and cruel to bind her. Why did nobody point out my selfishness? I saw it in Clement's face once, but he held his peace. It would have been better had they taken her away where her sweet compassion would never have been appealed to. Why did nobody speak? It was cruel! cruel!"

"My son, Evelyn was spoken to by Clement and by others," answered Lady Emily, quickly. "I do assure you she was not coerced. She married you of her own will freely, and I do not think she is very unhappy. It is not as if she disliked or despised you. She has always had a cousinly affection for you, William, and there are many marriages happy enough in the main which are built upon a less sure foundation."

William Ayre only wearily shook his head.

"You say these things to comfort me, mother, but the fact remains. Evelyn married me, believing that I had not many days, perhaps not many hours, to live. The possibility that I might recover never once suggested itself to her mind."

"And do you mean to say, William, that you believe she will feel herself aggrieved?"

"She has the right to be. If she refuses to keep the vows she took that day she has right upon her side. She shall be absolutely free, but who is to tell her this? God help me, I cannot."

"William, I do think you take a morbid view of it," his mother said, quickly. "Who has seemed so anxious, who so devoted, during these weary days as Evelyn? So marked has her attention been that Doctor Phillips spoke of it to me to-day, and of the happiness it would be to her to hear his favourable verdict."

"What you say is all true, but I see in it only the natural outcome of a woman's tender care for the sick and dying. It is better that I should face the true case manfully than shirk the issues which sooner or later must be met," he said with a kind of impatience which betrayed the keenness of his feelings. "Mother, will you leave me for a little, and see that I am not disturbed. I want to think this matter out. Above all, see that Evelyn does not come here. Say I am asleep, or anything, only keep her away."

Lady Emily rose up with a heavy sigh, and with a kiss left him to fight his silent battle. She locked the door from without, and, slipping the key in her pocket, went down to the drawing-room, where she found Rachel waiting with visible anxiety.

"I saw Doctor Phillips go some time ago," she said, quickly. "What did he say to-day? I was glad that Clement had kept Evelyn out of the way while he was here."

"Have they not come back? I am glad of it," Lady Emily said, hurriedly, and then to Rachel's great amazement suddenly burst into tears. It was very seldom, indeed, that the self-possessed woman so gave way, and to Rachel's mind it had but one significance.

"Dear Lady Emily, we have been long preparing for this, but it must always come as a shock," she said, tenderly. "There are many to help you to bear your sorrow when it comes. It is a common sorrow to us all."

"Strange, is it not, that I should weep at what I am glad of?" said William Ayre's mother, almost

solemnly. "I am overwrought. I seem to have utterly lost all my powers of self-control. And yet I never needed them more, for there is a crisis to be faced, and it must be faced at once."

She dashed the tears away from her eyes with something of her old imperiousness, and sitting up, looked straight into the grave, wondering face of her sister-in-law.

"The physician's verdict to-day is the reverse of what we expected. He says my son will be restored to health. It is a fearful complication. Poor Evelyn! she does not know what is in store for her."

For one moment only Rachel did not speak; and then it was with a swift and ready smile.

"What will you say if I tell you I have been preparing myself for this, that I have marked the improvement, but feared to say anything lest your hopes should be disappointed?"

"And do you mean to say that it is no sorrow, no disappointment, to you that your daughter will be bound for life to a delicate husband?"

"Why should it be? I see what lies heavy on your heart, Lady Emily. You fear that Evelyn will look at it from your standpoint. I think differently, and I am her mother. I do not say that at the present moment, perhaps, she entertains for Will the love a wife should have, the love of which you and I have known the sweetness and the strength, but I do say that there is no reason why it should not come."

A light, like the strong, beautiful dawning of a new day shone upon Lady Emily's face.

"May God bless you, Rachel, for ever and ever. It has been your happy privilege to be a blessing to many, but I question if you have ever so directly blessed a human soul as you have done to-day. If I could only believe you—oh, what a future I might look forward to, what hopes might blossom in my heart for my son and daughter. God grant that there may be truth in what you say."

"I am sure of it," repeated Rachel, with that gentleness which was part of herself. "Have you been with Will? Has he any idea of this, or were you afraid to tell him?"

"I have told him. He is in the depths of despair, Rachel. He thinks he has blighted Evelyn's life. It will need a great deal to reassure him. I believe," she added, with a quivering smile, "that the poor boy would die if he knew how. There would be something comical in it if it were not so intensely solemn and pathetic."

"Will you allow me to go to him now, before Evelyn returns?" asked Rachel. "Evelyn herself shall reassure him, but I shall pave the way. He used to put great faith in what I said. I must put his faith to the test to-night."

"Ay do. He believes in you, and reverences you above all women," said Lady Emily; and as she rose up, she laid her hand on her sister-in-law's shoulder, and for a moment they looked at each other in silence. "There have been many strange passages between you and me, Rachel," Lady Emily said. "Sometimes I look at you in simple wonder, asking myself wherein you differ from other women. The relations between us are not of an ordinary kind. We must either love each other with no ordinary love, or the reverse. My heart has gone out to you as it never went out to a living woman before. Do you forgive me? No, I will have no evasion. Tell me so with these lips which have never lied."

"I forgive you, since you will have your pound of flesh," said Rachel, with a sunny smile, and then the lips of these two women met for the first time in a kiss of peace—a kiss which blotted out the past, and was an earnest of sweeter, brighter, happier days to come.

#### CHAPTER XXXVI.—HUSBAND AND WIFE.

"That has done you all the good in the world, Evely. I must come and take you out every morning."

"It has done me good. I feel like a new creature, and Caliph has carried me splendidly, though Will seemed rather nervous. Just stand still a moment, Clem, and let us admire this prospect. Isn't it glorious?"