

SIR WILLIAM'S WILL

There was an old pony and an older basket-chair attached to the establishment, and the two girls often went for a drive. "Though 'drive' is scarcely the word for it," Mollie declared, "seeing that this antediluvian animal, misnamed, with gross flattery, pony, declines to be driven, and goes where he likes, and how he likes." Within a little more than a mile of the cottage ran the silver Thames, and, when they were tired of the fir-clad hills, the gorse-covered commons, they drove alongside the river, watching the passing boats and stopping to feed the beautiful and impudent swans; and, as Mollie with secret joy observed, Clytie gradually recovered her health and strength—the soft air, impregnated with the magic terebene, was doing its work; and but for a certain wistfulness and vague anxiety, Clytie seemed herself again.

Bulletins arrived daily from the Towers. Percy was progressing favorably; but, Lady Mervyn reported, the patient was extremely irritable and impatient, and daily demanded the most detailed news of the two girls and their doings. Mollie always answered these letters; and they were duly read to the suffering one by his devoted aunt. With the imperiousness of a sick man, he declared his intention of joining them at Rose Cottage at the earliest opportunity.

"So that we shall have him here in the most fretful stage of his convalescence," remarked Mollie. "Good-bye to all our peace then."

Clytie looked at her and laughed lovingly. "As if I did not know that you wanted him, fretful or not, dear," she said in a low voice; and Mollie, apparently too indignant for words at this audacious assertion, flushed hotly, and, softly boxing Clytie's ears, bounced out of the room with a contemptuous sniff.

It was after dinner and a lovely evening, and Mollie, singing softly, went down to the little rustic gate and leaned over it. All was still save a thrush which was practising its scales; but presently Mollie heard a soft footstep on the pine-needles, and looking in the direction of the sound, saw a stalwart young man walking between the pines. So few persons trespassed on their solitude that she regarded him for a moment with curious interest; then suddenly she started, held her breath, and, glancing over her shoulder to see that Clytie was not upon the veranda, she opened the gate and walked quickly toward the stranger. He heard her, and turned sharply; and Mollie, with her eyes dancing, said demurely:

"Mr. Douglas!"

Jack, with a guilt-dyed countenance, responded with:

"Miss Mollie—don't—call out!"

"Why shouldn't I?" demanded Mollie. "But don't be alarmed; I have not any intention of doing so. But what are you doing here? And why did you run away from Withycombe? And why are you dressed like a gentleman?" For Jack wore a tweed suit which had given his tailor intense satisfaction. "What does it all mean, and what do you mean?"

Jack beckoned her out of ear-shot of the cottage, and, confronting her, gazed at her keenly, yet imploringly.

"Can I trust you, Miss Mollie?" he asked.

"You can," responded Mollie; "as much as any man can trust a woman."

"Tell me," he said, "is she—she is better? I have seen her once or twice, and she seems better, stronger."

"Of course, you mean my sister, Clytie?" said Mollie. "Yes, she is better; quite well, indeed. But hadn't you better answer my questions?"

Jack sighed and hung his head; then he glanced at the sharp eyes and sighed again.

"You know my secret, Miss Mollie," he said. "I—I love your sister."

"I love your sister?"

"Yes, I love your sister."

"I love your sister?"

"Yes, I love your sister."

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"I love your sister?"

The color rose an instant to Mollie's face, and she caught her breath.

"I know that," she said. "I've known it all along from the beginning. Well?"

"Well!" echoed Jack, feeling mean and deceitful. "You don't seem to remember, to realize, I, Jack Douglas, to love your sister, a Miss Bramley!"

Mollie looked at him curiously, with just a touch of indignation and resentment in her face.

"Oh, you mean because of the difference between you, I suppose."

"Yes," said Jack, feeling still more ashamed of himself. "A common fisherman, you know."

"You don't look like a common fisherman in those togs—I mean clothes. But if you are, love levels all distinctions, you know; and Clytie—What am I talking about? Mr. Douglas, if you really love my sister, you will behave like a man. A man—you understand? And tell her so."

"Tell her so!" echoed Jack, in dismay.

"Yes," said Mollie, "or what's the use of being a man?"

Jack paced up and down and drew long breaths.

"Perhaps you are right," he said; but—

"There's no buts," said Mollie, decisively. "I don't ask why you left Withycombe all of a sudden, or what you've been doing since. If you are in love with my sister, that explains everything. But—you want say advice?"

"Oh, I do, Miss Mollie," said Jack, fervently.

"Then take the first opportunity to tell her," said Mollie. "It's a beautiful night; it will be a fine day to-morrow. We shall be down at Shepperton Lock to-morrow, in a thing they call a basket-chair, at three o'clock in the afternoon. Good evening, Mr. Douglas."

She turned and went back to the cottage before Jack could say a word.

At three o'clock the next day he was seated on the edge of Shepperton Lock; and Mollie, as she persuaded by whip and voice, the pony to approach the spot, exclaimed:

"Why, there's somebody I know!—Jack Douglas!"

Clytie, who had been lying back, with her eyes half-closed and drinking in the soft, perfumed air of the early spring, sat bolt upright and, with a blush, exclaimed:

"Jack Douglas! Impossible! Mollie!"

"It is always the impossible that happens, my dear," said Mollie, calmly. "How do you do, Mr. Douglas?"

Jack came forward. His face was pale, for his heart was beating furiously.

"It's a—strange meeting," he said, as he shook hands. He was too agitated to notice the tremor that shook Clytie's little paw as his big flat—on closed it. "I—I came down here—"

"Oh, don't explain!" exclaimed Mollie. "You are here, and that's enough. We are staying at a place called Rose Cottage. Come up and have some tea with us. You have given us tea often enough, and we are glad to return the compliment. You shall drive, for my arms are tired. This is a pony. I mention the fact because you might take it for a piece of wood. Sit where you are, Clytie. And what brings you down to this part of the world, Mr. Douglas?"

She did not wait for an answer, but rattled on as if it were quite the most natural thing that he should be sitting on Shepperton Lock; and Jack offered no explanation.

He persuaded the pony to ascend to Rose Cottage; and he said but little during the journey, addressing even that little to Mollie, rather than to Clytie.

The color came to be so absorbed in Mr. Jack Douglas as not to notice her sister's embarrassment.

During their slow progress to the cottage, if he looked at Clytie it was only with a sideways glance. When they came to a hill, he and Mollie got out and walked; and Mollie talked as freely and as unrestrainedly as if she and Jack Douglas had only been apart for a few hours. Insensibly he and Clytie—fell into her manner; and then they were all laughing and talking, as if they had been meeting like this for many days, long before they reached the cottage.

Mollie commanded tea to be brought out under the veranda, and, afterward, Jack lit his pipe and lay full length at the feet of Clytie as she reposed in the huge wicker chair. Once or twice he tried to rouse himself from the delicious dream, to explain his presence and his sudden departure from Withycombe; but Mollie always managed to stop him, without seeming to do so. She called their attention to a blackbird, or the red glow of the sunlight on the furze, or dilated on the beauty of the neighborhood; and at last Jack acquiesced in their evident desire to bury the past and accept his presence there as quite an ordinary matter.

He talked of London, of anything that came into his mind; and Clytie lay back in her chair and listened with half-closed eyes and lips slightly parted, with a smile of contentment and happiness. And Mollie watched her covertly. They asked Jack to remain to dinner, and waived aside the obstacle of his morning suit.

It was a delicious, a delightful meal; and afterward they went outside—that is, Mollie and Jack did. Clytie remained indoors, and, going to the piano, played the Braga serenade; and the exquisite music, to which she sang

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her lips quivering and made her eyes dark with pain and trouble.

Jack looked toward the window anxiously, as if he would call Mollie; but Clytie raised her hand slightly to check him.

"I must speak!" she said in a low voice. "But ah! it is so difficult! And yet I cannot wait. There is no time. I dare not stop to ask what you—you will think of me. I want to ask you a question which will surprise, shock you. I must—I must ask you. It is—"

Her brows were drawn together, her hands writhed in her lap; but her eyes met his steadily. "Will you marry me?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

"Will you marry me?" Jack did not start, his heart did not even leap. He felt like a man in a dream. The glamour of her presence, her voice, the subtle influence of his love, deprived him of the capacity of surprise. He was like one held in thrall. He had been living in a dream during the last two days; and this was a part of the phantasmagoria. It actually did not seem strange to him that a woman should address such a question to a man; for was it not Clytie who had spoken? Clytie, the purest, the most modest of her sex? It was she who had put the question, and, because it was she, it was bereft of all immodesty, impropriety. A sense of sudden joy, of unspeakable happiness thrilled through him; but vaguely, not actually—for was he not in a dream?

She waited for his answer, her eyes on his.

"Yes," he said in a low voice, a little thickly. "You know I will. She gave a sigh of relief. "You do not ask me why I ask you," she said, her lips quivering, but with no blush on her face, which was still white, her brows drawn straight. "You will not ask."

"I do not ask, and I will not," he said.

He longed with a terrible eagerness to tell her that he loved her, that her question had opened the gates of paradise to him, the lover's perfect earthly paradise; but he was aware, in some subtle way, that to speak of love, of passion, would break the spell under which this happiness of his was being woven, as if by supernatural hands.

"You are good," she said, "very good to me. I know what must be passing in your mind—that you must be thinking of me—"

Her voice broke, and now there came a faint color to her face.

"I think nothing but good of you," he said, almost humbly. "It would be impossible for me to think anything else."

"And you do not ask the reason," he said. "I am surprised startled. You would not believe me if I were to tell you that I was not. You must have some good, serious, powerful reason for saying what you have said to me. We will let it rest until you choose to tell me. I want to say only this, Clytie, that, in saying yes, I have accepted at your hands a gift more precious—Oh, what can I say? But you know, you must know that I love you—that I have loved you since the first time we met."

He paused a moment; should he tell her that he was Sir Wilfrid Carton? He felt the impulse to do so; but he resisted. He was completely in the dark as to her reason for asking him to marry her; it was impossible for him to even form a conjecture, and he was terribly afraid lest, if she should know who he was, she should draw back.

"Yes, I love you," he went on; "therefore, you must know how—I am feeling; must know better than I can tell you. I can't tell you!"

He drew his hand over his brow and caught his breath. "All I want to know now is just what you want me to do. Whatever it may be, I will do it."

"You will do it," she said in a low voice, "without asking questions?"

"Without asking any questions," he broke in. "It is a promise."

"It is a promise," she breathed. "If I ask you to keep our engagement secret, to tell no one, not even my sister—I may have to tell her; but I have to, I myself will tell her."

He nodded. "It shall be so," he said. "I will tell no one. But this is not a hard thing to lay upon me. Is there nothing else, Clytie?"

"Yes," she said painfully. "But I—I can scarcely speak the words, I—I am ashamed." She moved restlessly, and, almost for the first time, turned her eyes away from him.

His hand gripped the back of her chair, and he bent over her.

"You are incapable of doing anything shameful. There is, you say, there must be, a good reason for what you are going to do. I love you, I trust you, with all my heart and soul. Try to think that I am just your slave, and simply eager and overjoyed to do anything you require of me. I can't put it better than that; I wish I could. But you will understand. Tell me what it is?"

His voice was low and infinitely tender; and it spoke even more plainly than his words of his full, unquestioning trust in her, of his desire to meet and obey her wishes, however strange they might appear to any other person, even to himself.

Her eyes met his again, and gratitude was mixed with the trouble and pain in hers.

"It is—our marriage—"

and in so low a voice that he had to bend still lower to catch the broken words. "I want—it is necessary—that it should be soon."

(To be continued.)

GARDEN STUFF.
(Blighty, London.)

"Did you garden?" win any prizes last summer?

"Indirectly, yes. My neighbor's chickens took first prize at the poultry show."

her lips quivering and made her eyes dark with pain and trouble.

Jack looked toward the window anx