

John Redfern's Will

"Wilfred," she said—and her voice was calm and firm—"he cannot prevent my waiting for you—and I will wait for you."
"My true darling! But, Constance dear, you do not know what your promise implies. I have no prospect—absolutely none. It might be years—"
"Well, I don't mind how many. Five, ten—"

"No, dearest; I see now that it would be utter selfishness in me even to wish to bind your bright young life to so hopeless a prospect as that of waiting for me. Besides, even should I be willing to do so, I have your father's expressed wish to the contrary—expressed in such a way that I could not with honor disregard it. No, Constance, we must part now—ay, now," he repeated almost bitterly, as the clock struck a quarter to one. "Mr. Joyce limited me to half an hour."

How the ensuing few minutes passed Wilfred scarcely knew; his next coherent thought was, as he went down the staircase, amid all the moulding, gilding, stained glass, and rare flowers, that his life-star was set and his future one dark cloud of rayless desolate blackness.

Three weeks had slowly rolled away since the day on which Constance and Wilfred parted. The poor girl had tried to bear her trial bravely; but she found it hard to do so. To Constance Joyce, whose nineteen years had been years of unbroken sunshine, this was her first cross, and it was a heavy one. As day after day dawned and brought no Wilfred, she grew pale and spiritless. Every one remarked that she was not "looking well;" and her father was not blind to the same fact; but with his theory concerning modern arts, he was not much concerned as to the ultimate result.

"Of course she feels it somewhat, poor girl," he would say to himself—"it is natural enough; but in a week or two she will be all right." And on the strength of this conclusion he allowed three to pass in peace; then he began to change his tactics.

It was a bitterly cold morning in December, 1874, and Constance was reclining in a low easy-chair before a bright fire, thinking, as was her wont when alone, of Wilfred, when the opening of her door roused her. For a moment a half-delirious hope possessed her; the next it was stifled by the sound of the measured step that announced Mr. Joyce. "Papa," she cried, rising, "I never expected to see you at this hour of the morning!"

"Perhaps not," smiled the merchant; "but I have come to the conclusion that one may spend an hour profitably elsewhere than in the city."

"So you are going to stay all the forenoon with me? Oh, how kind of you! There, sit down"—pulling forward another easy-chair—"we shall have such a nice time."

Mr. Joyce looked round him rather uneasily, then sat down and gazed into the fire, then at his daughter.

"You are not looking very well, Constance," was his first remark.

"I—I dare say I shall be better by-and-by," she replied quietly, a slight color tingling her cheeks.

"I hope so. I am afraid, Constance, you are thinking too much of—that unfortunate affair—your young Ainslie's, you know."

Constance did not answer—she could not.

"Very unfortunate affair—very unfortunate indeed," went on her father. "His uncle used him very badly."

Still no remark from the young lady.

"I am really very sorry; but, as it was, of course,"—he paused, evidently hoping for some comment, but none came—"there was no help for it."

"Papa, let us talk of something else."

She felt as if she could bear his remarks no longer.

"Yes, my dear, quite so—in fact, it was of something else that I wanted to speak to you. I have—this is—in short, Constance, this morning I had a proposal from a gentleman for you."

"A proposal!"

"Yes, a proposal of marriage."

"Tell him, papa, that I am very much obliged to him, but I cannot accept it."

"My dear—"

"Papa, it is only three weeks since I was the betrothed of Wilfred Ainslie; how could I think of another?"

"Be reasonable, my child. I have owned that that was a very distressing affair, but now it is past. Wilfred and you have parted; and I am sure that he would be the last in the world to desire that you should ruin your prospects for his sake."

"He would indeed. And do you think that I—"

"And," went on Mr. Joyce, not heeding the interruption, "he would be grieved did he know what a morbid state you have allowed yourself to get into. Why, Constance, you have not even had the curiosity to ask the gentleman's name!"

"It does not matter, papa, as I do not mean to accept him."

"It does matter; and, although you are so ungrateful to him, I shall tell you. He is Mr. Laurence Markham."

"He!" exclaimed the girl, springing to her feet. "I would accept almost any one in great Britain sooner."

"Constance, I am surprised to hear you speak in such a way of a man against whom the finger of scandal has never been raised—a steady, well-principled young man, handsome—if you wish for beauty—and, last, not least, one who adores you."

"I cannot help it."

"Constance," said her father slowly, "if you are inexorable, I will tell you something that otherwise you should never have known. I foresee great commercial difficulties at hand. You do not understand these things, but I may tell you that, unless some powerful aid is interposed, I shall be ruined; I shall not have more than the miserable beggar who craves alms from door to door."

Constance turned white and trembled.

"And my marriage—what can it have to do with this?"

"Everything. With ready money at the time when it will be wanted, I shall be saved; with the owner of four hundred thousands pounds at my back, all will be well; if not—But no—I dare not think of that."

Constance was trembling in every limb; not only the magnitude, but also the indefiniteness of the calamity frightened her.

"And does it all depend upon me?" she faltered.

"All," returned her father solemnly.

"If I marry Laurence Markham?"

"You are going to consent! My own sweet Constance. I knew that I should not appeal to you in vain! Yet, believe me, my beloved child, had the man been other than what he is, never should I have asked you to consent. But you will be the adored wife of an upright, honourable man; you will have saved yourself from sufferings that you cannot imagine; you will have saved your father from a dishonoured grave! My Constance, how can I thank you?"

"But," she protested, with one last effort, "I have not consented yet."

"But you will, my own sweet girl; I know you will! Still I do not wish to appear unreasonable, Constance, neither would Mr. Markham. By his particular and, I will say, most considerate wish you will have three days to think over it; but I know that my darling child will not consign herself and her father to certain misery—ay, and I feel that it would be certain death to me—merely to gratify a feeling—a most natural and laudable feeling, I own, but still—"

"I know, I know," she interrupted.

"But, oh, papa, leave me now."

"And what then?"

"I will do my best," she replied.

"My true, noble child—best and most dutiful of daughters!"

Before Mr. Joyce had come into the room, Constance considered that she was the most miserable girl in England; after he had left, her future appeared more uninviting still. Look which way she would, no friendly ray shone upon her. Life without Wilfred had seemed desolate indeed; but she had never quite given up hope, although she had told herself often that she had done so. Only now, when she was brought face to face with the possibility—nay, almost the necessity—of marrying another, did she know how strong that hope had been. Through the long afternoon and evening, through the weary hours of the troubled night, did she do battle with her heart.

Next day the thought of the man who would be her husband came prominently before her, and this by no means lessened her trouble. Constance had never liked Laurence Markham, but she could assign no reason for her dislike; no one had ever by the slightest word assailed his character—even Wilfred himself had sometimes taken his part. Her father had spoken truly of Markham's love for her; she had long known of it and perhaps it would not be such utter wretchedness after all, she thought. Arrived at this stage, she reproached herself bitterly of unfaithfulness to Wilfred in even thinking of ever being happy with another, and went to bed to spend a night more miserable than the preceding one.

Wednesday morning dawned—rainy, foggy, and pitilessly cold; even with great fires in every room, she shivered, then wondered how she could ever bear the hardships of a poverty so great that it would possibly not admit of a fire at all. A man in ragged garments passed, looking blue and wretched; she remembered what her father had said of begging alms from door to door. Another idea here intruded, and demanded consideration. Wilfred had refused to let her wait for him—had, of his own free will, bidden her farewell for ever; was not that a sacrifice of all for him then almost the refinement of romantic devotion? Was it a devotion for which he would thank her? So the battle went on, sometimes one thought being victorious, sometimes another; and thus the forenoon and afternoon passed, bringing the hour for recording her decision nearer and nearer.

Since Monday forenoon Mr. Joyce had never once alluded to that which was uppermost in her mind; but on this evening he said, as she rose from the dinner-table—

"At nine Laurence Markham will be here; my Constance, what answer shall I give him?"

"Send him to me, papa, and I will answer him."

"You will say—" With an expression of painful anxiety he looked into her face.

"I shall not fail you papa; do not ask me to say more."

"My beloved Constance! Was ever man so blessed in his child?"

But no ray of brightness gleamed from the pale still face as Constance went quietly out of the door and up-stairs, past the brilliantly-lighted drawing-room, to her own boudoir, where, in darkness, but for the bright fire, in silence, save for the ticking of the clock, she waited with the calmness of despair for the hour of her doom.

Ting, ting, ting—a quarter to nine—footsteps in the passage outside the door. He was before his time. Ah, well, what did it matter? It was only fifteen minutes less of sickening suspense.

The door opened—he was in the room; but she did not turn her head. His steps came nearer, he knelt down beside her—still she did not look; then a face that was not Laurence Markham's breathed her name.

"Constance!"

She looked now, looked right into the loving brown eyes she knew so well, and

heard the soft tones that were to her the sweetest music in all the world murmur—

"My darling Constance, mine once more; now we shall never part again!"

The three weeks that had been so trying to Constance Joyce had been little less so to Wilfred Ainslie. Mr. Joyce's quotation of "What can you do?" had presented itself to him in many and various forms, if not in actual words. "If you were younger, Mr. Ainslie," "If you had ever had any business training, Mr. Ainslie," were the words which grew too familiar to his ear, and never failed to send a cold chill to his heart. At the end of his three weeks of diligent search for work he had to acknowledge that he was still very far from any tidal wave bearing even the smallest promise of fortune. Only one opening presented itself; through the efforts of Mr. Parker, the family lawyer, he was offered a classical mastership in a school near London. Workham Academy seemed to be his destiny, for nothing else presented itself; so on the evening of the day that Constance had made up her mind to leave her father, he slowly wended his way towards Mr. Parker's office, to tell that worthy gentleman to inform Mr. Grindby that Mr. Ainslie would accept the responsibility of instructing the youth of Workham Academy in that most useful branch, a knowledge of the tongues of Greece and Rome.

It was not a very brilliant prospect certainly; and Wilfred, with that instinctive putting off of the evil day common to all, let it be rather late in the evening ere he presented himself at Mr. Parker's office. So late was it that he feared as he knocked at the door, lest Mr. Parker—enthusiastic worker though he was—should have gone away. Such however was not the case; nevertheless something wonderful had happened—the old gentleman had fallen asleep! The consequence of this unheard-of event was that, when Wilfred entered the room, all was dark, save for the light of the fire. Mr. Parker started from the depths of his easy-chair as the door opened, and the light was bright enough to enable him to recognise his visitor.

"Ah, Ainslie, it is you! Well, what is it to be?"

"I am come to say that I accept Mr. Grindby's offer."

"Very good—I shall write to-night. I don't fancy you will like it, my boy; its only recommendation is the handsome salary. I wish your uncle—But there—it can't be helped; still it was a great pity—a great pity."

"It may be all for the best; and perhaps my cousin will do more good with the money than I should have done."

"No, he won't, nor half as much good. Can't fancy what your uncle was thinking of. I was looking over his will just before—ahem!—just before you came in, and wondering over it. There it is on the table; sit down while I ring for lights."

Mechanically Wilfred had lifted the sheet of paper as the old gentleman spoke, and sat down with it before the blazing fire. The next moment he had sprung to his feet, with a strange half-articulate exclamation; and as Mr. Parker looked round in surprise, Wilfred put the paper into his hand, and pointed to the middle of the sheet.

Mr. Parker looked, wiped his spectacles and looked again, as if any looking could alter the fact that the paper on which was written the will dated 1863 bore a water-mark of 1874!

As the two looked at each other Laurence Markham, by some strange coincidence, entered the room.

"You here, Wilfred!" he said in an airy manner. "I say, old fellow, what are you going to do?"

"Take possession of his fortune, Mr. Markham," broke in the lawyer suddenly, fixing his eyes on Markham's face—"take possession of his fortune. A clever forgery, this will—very clever—but still a forgery."

Laurence Markham turned white as death.