



AUTUMN

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SIR WILLIAM'S WILL

"Yes," she rejoined. "I must. I am very sensible—you have paid me a very great honor—all that you have said about a difference between us, does not, would not, matter, even if it existed. I am only the mistress of Bramley for a time, for a very short time longer. No, it is not that. But—"

"You do not care for me as I want you to do?" he said, his voice full of anxious trouble. "I was not so bold, so vain, as to dream that you would; but I hoped that in time—"

She drew away from him and shook her head.

"No, I could not," she said, in a low voice.

"Is there no hope for me?" he said.

"Is there some one else?"

"The color threatened to rise to Clytie's face, but she kept it back. She was silent; but he had no suspicion. Who could there be, he asked himself quickly, unless there was some one to whom she had given her heart before she came to Bramley? But in that case he would have made his appearance long before this.

"Ah! I have no right to ask, I know; but if there is no one else, may I not venture to hope?"

"No, no," she said, quickly, and with a look of distress. "I could never marry you, Mr. Carton. And please accept my answer," she went on, hurriedly, as he was about to speak.

"It is—final. It would be wrong not to tell you so, because I know my own mind; I know that I could never—"

His face was scarcely paler than usual, but his lips came together tightly in a straight line, and his eyelids drooped to conceal the flash of resentment in them.

"I am—sorry," he said, his voice quivering. "It sounds a poor word to describe my disappointment, my pain. And yet I had scarcely dared to hope. I wonder whether you will think what I am going to say strange and unconventional?"

Clytie glanced at him, waiting, and shook her head, and he went on slowly, gravely:

"I see that I have no hope of winning your love," he said; "but there still remains to me a boon only less precious—your friendship. Under ordinary circumstances the rejected suitor bids farewell to the woman to whom he offered his heart. I am going to venture to ask you to break this rule. I am a lonely man, Clytie—I beg your pardon! For the future it must be Miss Bramley, even in my thoughts—I have few friends, real ones, and I should be more than grateful to you if you would permit me to remain your friend and would be gracious enough to remain mine. It has been very sweet to me to think that, when I leave my sordid toil at the works, I can come sometimes to the Hall, and enjoy the inestimable privilege of your and Miss Mollie's society."

He paused a moment; then went on: "I go to few, very few, other places, and if I should be bereft of this privilege, I shall deem it a very heavy loss. Indeed, all the brightness of my life will have gone out of it, and I shall be thrown back upon myself as a prisoner is thrown back into the prison from whence he has been permitted a few hours of escape into a brighter world. Though I have lost all the hope of anything nearer and dearer to you, I beg you to let me remain your friend. I will promise never to allude by word or look to this subject. And I assure you that you may trust me. Shall it be so?"

Clytie was not the girl to resist such an appeal; besides, she was grateful refusal so gently, so considerately. She held out her hand to him, and, in a voice so low as his, said:

"Why, yes, why should we not be

friends? You have paid me a very great honor, a very great compliment, and it would be foolish of us to regard each other as if we were mutually offended, as if we were enemies. Yes, we will be friends, Mr. Carton; and I hope you will come to the Hall as often as you care to do so, and as if nothing had happened. Indeed, I am not unselfish and disinterested in asking you to do so, because you have been so kind as to help me so many times, and I know that I shall need your help in the future."

"You shall put it that way, if you like," he said, with a smile. "Though I know that your goodness, your sweetness of heart, prompt you to so put it. And believe me that I am grateful, and shall be still more grateful for an opportunity of serving you. I will say good night now and here. I am scarcely equal to facing the others. I shall remember my promise, and will keep it. We are—just friends. Good night!"

He bent over her hand; but was too wise to raise it to his lips or even to press it; and when Clytie re-entered the drawing-room he had gone.

Hesketh lay back in the corner of the fly that took him back to Bramley, his head drooped on his chest, his arms folded, and with a scowl on his dark face which would have amazed the people he had just left, some of whom were at that moment remarking with approval on his admirable manners and his conversational ability. No man likes being rejected; and Hesketh had more reasons than the usual one for disappointment and chagrin. He knew that Clytie's decision was a final one, that she would never consent to marry him, that it was not as her husband he could ever hope to reign at Bramley Hall. To a man of his nature it was well-nigh maddening that this girl, so small a pawn on the board of life, should stand between him and his desires.

And the worst of it was, that she would thus stand to the bitter end; for, though she sometimes looked frail she was strong and healthy, and would most certainly marry some other man.

He let himself into the gloomy house, and paced up and down the room with a kind of wolfish impatience at the fate which seemed to mock him and balk him at every turn. Ah, well, there was nothing left for him but to devote himself to business, to develop the works and slowly scrape together a fortune which would enable him to enter public life and partially satisfy the ambitious spirit that worked like yeast within him; but strive as he might, succeed as he intended to succeed, he would never be master of Bramley.

He was too restless to go to bed, and he turned to the table and fell to work on some papers which were neatly piled there. It was routine work, and he proceeded with it almost mechanically, but presently he came upon a half-sheet of paper upon which was scribbled some figures and signs used in chemistry. He regarded it absently for a moment or two, as if he had forgotten what it was; then he remembered; it was the analysis he had made of the contents of the vial which had proved fatal to Martha Brown.

He took up the half-sheet of paper and, leaning back in his chair, regarded it thoughtfully. Suddenly he put it down on the table and drew back his chair, evening the paper with a strange expression on his face, an expression that was almost one of terror; of repulsion; and yet he continued to gaze at the scribbled figures as if he got up and went to the fire and warmed his hands, for a chill had crept over him that caused him to shudder. He resolutely kept his back to the table for a time, but presently he glanced over his shoulder, and after a while, he advanced slowly to the table and took up the paper again; it shook in his hand. Though the rest of him was as cold as ice, his head began to burn, his eyes grew dim, so that the figures and signs danced in a demonic fashion.

He glanced furtively from side to side, as if there were other presences in the room, as if he were listening to some insidious voice whispering in his ear; indeed, he actually waved his shaking hand as if to wave the voice away, but it seemed to persist; and, after a minute or two, he sank into the chair, and, with the paper crumpled in his hand, sat staring before him, his face white as death, his dark eyes glowing with a terrible expression in them.

And the voice still continued to whisper and he to listen, none with no impatience or resentment, but with something near akin to acquiescence.

CHAPTER XX.

The following morning Stanton almost burst into the breakfast-room

of the Hall where Clytie and Mollie were still lingering over the meal. They had been discussing the party at the Towers at which Mollie, at any rate, had enjoyed herself amazingly. On their way home Clytie had asked herself whether she should tell Mollie of Mr. Hesketh Carton's proposal; but had decided that she would not do so. A rejected proposal should remain a secret between the two persons principally concerned; besides, the fact that Mr. Hesketh Carton had dared—Clytie knew that that was how Mollie would put it—to ask her to be his wife, would only render the already strained relations between Mollie and Mr. Carton still more strained, and render the friendship between him and the two girls almost impossible.

So when Mollie had demanded to be informed what Clytie and he were talking about in the conservatory, Clytie had managed to satisfy her without disclosing the truth.

"Lord Stanton," said Mollie, and the boy bounced in with such an obviously feigned a dramatic start, and exclaimed:

"Don't tell me! I can guess! The Towers is burnt down!"

"Eh? No, no!" he said, laughing, but rather ruefully. "Nothing's the matter; that is—Oh, I say, I beg your pardon for rushing in like this, but I was afraid you'd gone out. Something has happened, though. I have just had the most extraordinary letter from Jack Douglas."

Clytie rose, on the pretence of seeing that the kettle was boiling—the servant did not wait at breakfast—so that neither of the others saw the sudden flushing of her face.

"You've not had your breakfast, Lord Stanton," she said. "Sit down and join us."

"Ah, yes," said Mollie. "Sit down if you can. But don't give him anything to eat or drink till he has told us what is the matter. Once you put food before men they forget everything else, as I know to my bitter cost. Lord Chillingford went through half his dinner last night before he condescended to address a remark to me; and I felt inclined to take his plate from him. Now, what about Jack Douglas—I beg his pardon, Mr. Douglas?"

"Why, he's gone!" exclaimed the lad.

Mollie glanced quickly at Clytie; but Clytie was on her guard now, and looked quite calm and serene; for, of course, she was not even surprised.

"Oh, gone on a holiday?" said Mollie.

"Well, I suppose he wanted it; I ought to say deserved it."

"But he's gone for good?" almost shouted Stanton.

"Gone for bad, you mean," corrected Mollie, suavely.

"I can't make it out. It almost looks as if he were offended about something; but I can't guess what it is. I saw him yesterday and gave him a cheque. We had a few words about it;—I mean, he thought it was too much. Of course it wasn't; I'm not so unbusinesslike." Mollie laughed derisively.

"Anyhow, it wasn't too much; and he took it at last, and promised to come up the specifications. He didn't come—first time Douglas has broken an appointment—and this morning Mrs. Westaway brings me this letter. She was awfully cut up, half in tears and half-nasty with me—as if I were to blame!—says Douglas left the cottage last night, or, rather, early this morning; that he kissed Polly good-bye and told her he was going, but that he was coming back; but the letter says—"

"Is the letter confidential, or may one, or, rather, two, be permitted to

hear it," said Mollie, smoothly.

"Of course!" he responded. "That's why I brought it round!"

He took out the letter, which poor Jack had written in his misery, and read it. Mollie drummed on the table with an air of impatience and something like vexation; but Clytie sat perfectly still, her chin in her hands, her eyes fixed on the cloth.

"You see, he gives no reason," said Stanton, aggrievedly. "I recommended him to take a holiday, because he was off color, and he had been working jolly hard and wanted a change. I had not the least idea that he'd got the hump of the whole thing, as he evidently has, and was going to leave the place for good. I don't know what I shall do without him. Feel as if I couldn't carry on without Douglas," he continued. "And I hate the thought of his going like this, as if—as if something were the matter and he'd been badly treated. What do you think in the matter?" he asked, looking from one to the other, anxiously.

Clytie made no reply, but Mollie shrugged her shoulders and said:

"I don't know. I suppose it would be wicked and unladylike—which is worse than wicked—to suggest that the admirable Mr. Douglas had gone on the spree."

"Mollie?" murmured Clytie, reprovingly.

"Well, you suggest something," retorted Mollie, defiantly. "But—but what does it matter? I mean, that the world will not come to an end because Mr. Jack Douglas has suddenly left Witherbycombe without rhyme or reason."

"That's all very well," remonstrated Stanton; "but what am I to do without him?" He looked from one to the other ruefully. "I feel like—a like a man without—without—"

"Without his nurse, put in Mollie, in an undertone, fortunately too low for Clytie to hear. "You will have to do without him. Engage another man to take his place."

Stanton shook his head. "Don't like doing that," he said, sullenly. "Seems—seems sort of disrespectful you know. Besides, I got fond of the baggar. He was such a decent chap. Almost like one of ourselves. You could talk to Jack Douglas as if—as if he were your brother, don't you know?"

Mollie shrugged her shoulders. "Well, I'm afraid I can't help you, unless you take us on in his place and talk to use like—like sisters."

"I shouldn't like you for a sister, Miss Mollie," said the lad, with a sudden blush.

(To Be Continued).

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