

A WILD PROXY.

BY MRS. W. K. OLIFFORD.

(Continued.)

'Stockbroking. He frightens us sometimes, but he thinks he is going to make a fortune.'

'And the father?'

'Father's very well, but he looks older. Now tell me about yourself and about Egypt.'

'I am quite well, thank you, and so is Egypt.'

'Are you glad to see me again?' she asked in her cheerful and wholly unsentimental voice.

'Yes, dear, very,' he said in a kindly tone enough. She dropped her head contentedly on to his knee, and drew her feet a little closer under her.

'Why didn't you write to me?' she asked.

'I didn't want to.'

'I wrote to you every week and never missed once. I did so long for a letter; a telegram now and then is so little.'

'I told you last time,' he said wearily, 'that you must not expect it. A man can't write long letters unless he is in love: it is one of the tests.'

'And you don't love?' She raised herself to her knees and put her hands on his shoulder and looked at him fearlessly as though he would only state a fact of which she had been long aware.

'I have told you,' he repeated more wearily still, 'what you are to me. You are my retreat, my shelter, my unsuspected haven in the world. I come here to rest, knowing that I shall find you always—and always the same to me; but I am not in love with you.'

'You used to be.'

'For a little while. I always feel affectionately towards you, though I forget you a good deal while I am away, unless I'm ill or tired, then I think of you—but I am glad to come back for a little while, it is such a rest, such a blessed rest,' and he pulled her head down on to his shoulder, and looked at her dull hair with something between gratitude and pity at his heart. 'You had much better give me up, Jean, and make up your mind never to see me again. I shall only cost you pain,' he said remorsefully.

'You always tell me that.'

'I know, and to give me up would be wisdom, little woman.'

'I can't. I will bear the pain.'

'And you would rather that I came to see you like this than not at all?' A little desperation spread itself over her calm face as she answered,

'I couldn't live without you. If you can't give me more than you do now I must be content, and thankful to have that.'

'I believe you would do anything on earth for me,' he said with wondering conviction.

'Yes, anything on earth,' she repeated in her clear voice, full of unflinching affection. 'I would work like a slave for you day and night. I would let you kill me if you liked. I would be a beggar in the street if it would do you any good. I don't know anything I would not do for you, no matter how badly you treated me in return.'

He was looking down into her eyes while she spoke. He saw her deficiency in charm, her homeliness; he noticed curiously the eager, bird-like expression on her face. He felt a compassion for her, an affection, but above either the hopelessness of its ever being possible that he could give her more than he gave her now. It had been perhaps a strange element in their intimacy that he had never lied or disguised his feelings towards her. He had tried to state them gently, but he had not deceived her one whit. Other women might win his love, his devotion, might wring his life out in the days to come, had done so already, but she at least had his truth, his anxious better side, and his soul (or that portion of it that he vouchsafed to let her see), was laid out bare and unflinchingly before her. He smoothed back her hair, and looked at her forehead. It was thin and white, with lines across it like his own. He stooped and kissed it softly.

'That's not the way to get a man you care for, you dear idiot,' he said sadly. 'Don't you know that he never loves the woman who makes herself into a doormat for him.'

'I would rather be that than nothing.' He set his teeth together.

'He goes out across it into the world,' he said.

'I should be glad if his feet went over me on the way,' she answered calmly.

He shook his head.

'You dear fool,' he said in a whisper, and the last word was like a tired carress, 'how you dig the ground from under you. You should never say things like that to a man, Jean, it's not the way to win him. He wants something more difficult.'

'You used to care for me once,' she said, 'do you remember how you came every day? Will you never—never be like that again—never love me as you did that summer?'

He was silent for a moment, then drew her closer to him, and wearily rested his face down on her again.

'I believe I shall come home to you to die,' he answered, with a little break in his voice. They were silent for a little space, she resting contentedly enough in his arms till he pushed her back quickly and gently, as if the current of his thoughts had suddenly changed. His face grew young

and eager again, 'When does Charlie want to go to California?' he asked briskly.

'He wants to go at any time, but father can't afford it.'

'How much does he want?'

'He says he can't do it under four hundred.' Merreday was silent for a moment, then answered firmly:

'All right, he shall have it. I had five thousand left me last year, he shall have the four hundred to-morrow.'

'Oh, no!'

'Why not?'

'He couldn't take it; we would not let him.'

'Listen to me, dear idiot,' he said, putting her face between his hands, and watching the course of a little hair he blew away as it wandered across her forehead. 'I don't want the money, I should only invest it in cotton factories on the banks of the Nile, or experiments in colour printing on stuffs, or any other idiosyncrasy with which it occurred to some romantic speculator to bait it. This four hundred pounds would save Charlie's life. You've no business to prevent a man from having his life saved. Besides you know it would make you happier, dear, and it will do me good, too; it may be counted for me,' and he wrinkled up his forehead, 'when everything else is counted against me. Let me do it. Don't and in my way and his.'

She crouched down on the floor again reflectively, and pulled his hand under her cheek.

'You shall do as you like: it would save Charlie,' she said in a low voice.

'Then it's settled; we'll talk of it presently, and arrange the details when he comes in. Now! Have you got Browning's poems?' He asked the question quite boisterously, and went towards the table singing from sheer light-heartedness.

'No,' she answered. The bird-like look came over her face again; it suggested that she was struggling after her most intelligent mood. 'I have often wanted to read them. I have heard they are so clever.'

'Here, then,' he said, triumphantly. 'I brought them for you; take them away;' and he lumped the volumes into her arms. 'Some more will come by post.'

'Oh, thank you, Frank, I shall value them so.' She looked at first one volume and then another. I shall put them in my own room; there's a little shelf put up there with nothing on it yet. 'James Lee's Wife,' she said, turning over the pages; 'it looks interesting,' and she began reading. It was so strange to hear the passionate words said without the least little tremour or inflection in her clear, cheerful voice:—

'Oh, love, love, no love! not so, indeed!

You were just weak earth, I know:

With much in you waste, with many a weed,

And plenty of passions run to seed,

But a little good grain too.'

He stared at her for a moment. 'That's me,' he said. 'Shut it up, here comes Charlie.'

Merreday looked in at Han's Place on his way back, he was in wild spirits, relieved at having got his visit to Charlton over, and delighted at what he had done there. He had satisfied his own conscience and made the little woman easy. Perhaps, take him altogether, he was at his best with Jean; but he was glad when he had got his best over for a while. Dinner was going on. Mrs. Ives had waited for her husband till nine, and at last sat down alone.

'Please, may I have some?' the demon asked merrily. 'I have dined once, but that does not matter. I have been to Charlton to see the Galtons, and am glad to get back.' The table was covered with flowers, Mrs. Ives was looking her best, the food was dainty. It was so different from the surroundings of a couple of hours ago—the uninviting table, the roast beef, no one should eat beef in the summer, he thought, Jean in her morning dress, her hair more tightly screwed up than ever, Ben looking like a smirking city clerk; Charlie, who had knocked out a front tooth and seemed bent on letting people know it, evidently ill, but excited at his prospects, Mr. Galton with a little shaky movement of the head which he had only lately acquired. And yet—and yet, in some odd way, with that spare little woman at Charlton whom he did not even love, Frank Merreday, of the twenty different lives, and all of them taken at a pace, felt a sense of home that existed nowhere else for him in the world. But it was a home in which he did not want to stay long; a restlessness and impatience depressed him when he was there, the knowledge that the joys and sorrows and ambitions of life were all beyond it made him impatient to get away, while yet something undefinable bound him to the home. He looked up at Mrs. Ives. 'What a comfort it is to come here again,' he sighed.

'Yes, isn't it?' she answered soothingly, and she fiddled with the salt-spoon at the corner of the table.

'I love you,' he said, and stooped and kissed her fingers.

'So does Percy; he adores me.'

'Damn Percy.'

'Indeed I won't, you shocking boy. There he comes.' She looked up with easy affection at Mr. Ives, and leisurely withdrew her hand from the corner. 'Sweet old darling, Frank is here and making love to me disgracefully. Come and protect your only wife.'

'I think you can manage to do that for yourself, my dear. If you had

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