

WHAT CAN SHE DO?

By E. P. Roe.

(Continued.)

She kept her room during the afternoon, pleading that she did not feel well. It gave her pain to be with her mother and Laura, now that she purposed to leave them so abruptly; and she wished to see nothing that would shake her resolution to go as she had arranged. She wrote to Edith as follows:

"I am going, Edith, to meet Mr. Van Dam, as he told me. I cannot—I will not believe that he will prove false to me. I leave his letter, which I received to-day. Perhaps you never will forgive me at home, but whatever becomes of poor little Zell, she will not cease to love you all. I would only be a burden if I stayed. There will be one less to provide for, and I may be able to help you far more by going than staying. Don't follow me. I've made my venture, and chosen my lot."

Zell."

As the long twilight was deepening, Hamball, returning from the well with a pail of water, heard the gate-latch click, and looking up, saw Zell hurrying out with hat and shawl on, and having the appearance of carrying something under her shawl. He felt a little surprise at first, but then Zell was so full of impulse, that he concluded,

"She's going to meet Miss Edie. We've all a lookin' and leamin' on Miss Edie, for bress her!"

But Zell was going to perdition. Little later the stage brought tired Edith home, but in better spirits than before, as she had realized a somewhat fair sum for what she had sold, and had been treated politely.

After taking off her things, she asked, "Where is Zell?"

"Lying down, I think," said Laura. "She complained of not feeling well this afternoon."

But Hamball's anxious face in the door now caught her attention, and she joined him at once.

"Didn't you meet Miss Zell?" he asked in a whisper.

"Meet her? No," answered Edith, excitedly.

"Dat's queer. She went out with hat and shawl on a little while ago. Praps she's come back, and gone up stairs again."

Trembling she could hardly walk steadily, Edith hurried to her room, and there saw Zell's note. Tearing it open, she only read the first line, and then rushed down to her mother's sobbing,

"Zell's gone."

"Gone! Where?" they said, with dismayed faces.

Edith's only reply was to suddenly look at her watch, put on her hat, and dart out of the door. She saw that there was still ten minutes before the evening boat passed the Pushton landing, and remembered that it was sometimes delayed.

There was a shorter road to the dock than the one through the village, and she took, with flying feet, and a white but determined face. It would have been a terrible thing for Van Dam to have met her then. She seemed sustained by supernatural strength, and, walking and running by turns, made the mile and a half in an incredibly short space of time.

As she reached the top of the hill above the landing, she saw the boat coining in to the dock. Though panting and almost spent, again she ran at the top of her speed. Half way down she heard the plank ring out upon the wharf.

"Stop!" she called. But her parched lips uttered only a faint sound, like the cry of one in a dream.

A moment later, as she struggled desperately forward, there came, like the knell of hope, the command, "All aboard!"

"Oh, wait, wait!" she again tried to call, but her tongue seemed paralyzed.

As she reached the commencement of the long dock, she saw the lines cast off. The great wheels gave a vigorous revolution, and the boat swept away.

She was too late. She staggered forward a few steps more, and then all her remaining strength went into one agonized cry.

"Zell!"

And she fell fainting on the dock.

Zell heard that cry, and recognized the voice. Taking her hand from Mr. Van Dam's arm, she gazed her face in sudden remorseful weeping.

But it was too late.

She had left the shelter of home, and ventured out into the great pitiless world on nothing better than Van Dam's word. It was like walking a rotten plank out into the sea.

Zell was lost!

CHAPTER XX.

DESOLATION.

Not only did Edith's bitter cry startle poor Zell, coming to her ear as a despairing recall from the battlements of heaven might have sounded to a fallen angel, but Arden Lacey was as thoroughly aroused from his painful reverie as if shaken by a giant hand. He had been down to meet the boat, with many others, and was sending off some little produce from their place. He had not noticed in the dusk the closely-veiled lady; indeed, he rarely noticed any one unless they spoke to him, and then gave but brief, surly attention. Only one had scanned Zell curiously, and that was Tom Crowl. With his quick eye for something wrong in human action, he was attracted by Zell's manner. He could not make out through her thick veil who she was, in the increasing darkness, but he saw that she was agitated, and that she looked eagerly for the coming of the boat, also landward, where the road came out on the dock, as if fearing or expecting something from that quarter. But when he saw her join Van Dam, he recognized his old bar-room acquaintance, and surmised that the lady was one of the Allen family.

Possessing these links in the chain, he was ready for the next. Edith's presence and cry supplied this, and she chuckled exultantly,

"An elopement!" and ran in the direction of the sound.

But Arden was already at Edith's side, having reached her almost at a bound, and was gently lifting the unconscious girl, and regarding her with a tenderness only equalled by his helplessness, and perplexity in not knowing what to do with her.

The first impulse of his great strength was to carry her directly to her home. But Edith was anything but etherial, and long before he could have passed the mile and a half, he would have fainted under the burden, even though love nerved his arms. But while he stood in piteous irresolution, there came out from the crowd that had gathered round, a stout, middle-aged woman, who said, in a voice that not only betokened the utmost confidence in herself, but also the assurance that all the world had confidence in her:

"Here, give me the girl. What do you men-folks know about women?"

"I declare it's Mrs. Groody from the hotel," ejaculated Tom Crowl, as this delightful drama (to him) went on from act to act.

"Standin' there and holden' of her," continued Mrs. Groody, who was sometimes a little severe on both sexes, "won't bring her to, unless she fainted 'cause she wanted some one to hold her."

A general laugh greeted this implied satire, but Arden, between anger and desire to do something, was almost beside himself. He had the presence of mind to rush to the boat house and get a bucket of water, and when he arrived with it a man had also procured a lantern, which revealed to the curious onlookers that gathered around with craning necks, the pale features of Edith Allen.

"By golly, but it's one of them Allen girls," said Tom Crowl eagerly. "I see it all now. She's down to stop her sister who's just ran away with one of those city scamps, that was up here a while ago. I saw her join him and take his arm on the boat, but wasn't sure who she was then."

"Might know you was round, Tom Crowl," said Mrs. Groody. "There's never nothing wrong going on but you will see it. You are worse than any old woman for gossip. Why don't you put on petticoats and go out to tea for a livin'?"

When the laugh ceased at Crowl's expense, he said:

"Don't you put on airs, Mrs. Groody; you are as glad to hear the news as any one. It's a pity you turned up and spoiled Mr. Lacey's part of the play, for, if this one is anything like her sister, she, perhaps, wanted to be held as you—"

Tom's further utterance was effectually stopped by such a blow across his mouth, from Lacey's hand, as brought the blood profusely on the spot, and caused such disfigurement, for days after, that appropriate justice seemed visited on the offending region.

"Leave this dock," said Arden, sternly; "and if I travel any slander to you concerning this lady or myself, I will break every bone in your miserable body."

Crowl shrunk off amid the jeers of the crowd, but when reaching a safe distance, said, "You will be sorry for this."

Arden paid no heed to him, for Edith, under Mrs. Groody's treatment, gave signs of returning consciousness, and signs of returning consciousness, she slowly opened her eyes, and turned them wonderingly around; then came a look of wild alarm, as she saw herself surrounded by strange bearded faces, that appeared both savage and grotesque, in the flickering light of the lantern.

"Oh, Heaven, have mercy," she cried, faintly, "Where am I?"

"Among friends, I assure you, Miss Allen," said Arden, kneeling at her side.

"Mr. Lacey! and are you here?" said Edith, trying to rise. "You surely will protect me!"

"Do not be afraid, Miss Allen. No one would harm you for the world; and Mrs. Groody is a good kind lady, and will see you safely home, I am sure."

Edith now became conscious that it was Mrs. Groody who was supporting her, and regaining confidence, as she recognized the presence of a woman.

"Law bless you, child, you needn't be scared. You have only had a faint. I'll take care of you, as young Lacey says. Seems to me he's got wonderfully polite since last summer," she muttered to her self.

"But where am I?" asked Edith, with a bewildered air. "What has happened?"

"Oh, don't worry yourself; you'll soon be home and safe."

But the memory of it all suddenly came to Edith, and even by the lantern's light, Arden saw the sudden crimson pour into her face and neck. She gave one wild deprecating look around, and then buried her face in her hands as if to hide the look of scorn she expected to see on every face.

The first arrow aimed by Zell's great wrong already quivered in her heart.

"Don't you think you could walk a little now, just enough to get into the hack with me and go home?" asked the kind woman, in a soothing voice.

"Yes, yes," said Edith, eagerly; "let us get away at once." And with Mrs. Groody's and Arden's assistance, she was soon seated in the hack, and was glad to note that there was no other passenger.

The ride was a silent one. Edith was too exhausted from her desperate struggle to reach the boat, and her heart was too bruised and sore, to permit on her part much more than monosyllables, in answer to Mrs. Groody's efforts at conversation. But as they stopped at the cottage, her new friend said, cheerily,

"Don't take it so hard, my child; you ain't to blame. I'll stand by you if no one else will. It don't take me long to know a good honest girl when I see one, and I know you mean well. What's more, I've took a liking to you, and I can be a pretty fair sort of a friend if I do work for a livin'."

(To be Continued)

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