

"Shall I? I cannot imagine a fairy prince, or one of any variety, coming into Lakeden."

"And till he comes—you'll never marry?" looking away from her.

"I have hardly thought as far as that," coldly. She could not control her voice.

"No, I suppose not. Women are different." He was still looking away from her; his own voice was not cold, rather broken and unsteady. "As for me, I'm no longer a young man. Years ago, when I stood alone face to face with the world, I said to myself that I would never ask a woman to share my struggle. Now that there is no longer any need of hardship, I find that I have hardly the courage to ask a woman to share the easy life that my new riches has opened to me. It seems some way as if I was simply buying a wife."

It was more like a soliloquy than any speech that required answer. Leah did not speak. Was that the way he talked to Kitty?

"Sometimes I am conscious of a kind of pity for myself, as if there were nothing more lonely in the world than my life. I can't even work. I have tried to interest myself in the old pursuits, and there is no motive behind it. I can't do it."

"If I were a man, with money, I should neither ask pity, nor feel that I deserved it."

She looked him straight in the face. There was a touch of scorn in the expression of her lips and in the sound of her voice. She began to be interested in him, to the extent at least of wanting him to assert his man's prerogative of dominant strength.

"You know what it is to be poor, you say. But to be poor and a woman—you do not know that!"

She flung out her hands with palms turned outward, this woman who never made a gesture, and then dropped them with a shivering sigh.

"Is it so bad as that?" he asked, gently.

She did not answer him. The horses were walking over the sandy road among the pines. There was no sound but the soft crushing of their hoofs and the wheels. This was no unconscious self-betrayal in which he had been indulging. He meant to win this woman for his wife, and if one means of approach failed, he should try another. That he believed Dick Mason loved her did not matter in the least to him. Dick would console himself elsewhere. If she loved Dick, that would have been a different matter—perhaps.

"I think," he said, slowly, "there may be brighter days in store for both of us. Would you marry a man you did not love, Miss Leah?"

The question was so irrelevant, so unexpected! She flung it back at him.

"Would you marry a woman who did not love you, Mr. Holland?"

It took him off his guard a little.

"If I loved her and believed in her—yes." He said it slowly; there was a kind of sweetness, almost a solemnity in his voice. It was almost as if he were repeating a vow to himself. "Yes, I think I should be strong enough for even that, and she would love me at last, if patient endeavor could win her."

The tears came into her eyes. There was no purpose in that. George Holland was worth something beside his money. She looked up into his face, not trying to hide her own.

Why did he not speak the final words then? He never could tell himself. Perhaps at heart he was a coward, and dared not face defeat. Perhaps it was easier to linger a while longer in the shadow of uncertainty, rather than meet the bare, hard fact of refusal.

He touched his horses lightly with the whip, and they sprang forward. The spell was broken. With the rapid motion they flung all personal subjects behind them. They talked of the hills and Lakeden in winter, and he told her of his life in India and Australia and the ends of the earth.

The next morning, without a word to any one, he went to New York.

When he stood again in Lakeden post-office a week's accumulation of mail awaited him. He was carelessly looking over his handful of letters and papers, standing with his back to a group of loungers on the porch. Out of the hum of voices came as distinctly as if spoken for his benefit the words:

"Both the Allen girls are down with the small-pox."

He felt as if some one had struck him. He did not turn for a minute, standing quite still. When he had got his balance again, he walked out among the idlers.

"Who is their doctor?" he asked, in a matter-of-fact way.

"Dr. Sprague;" and then there was a silence.

They looked after him as he walked away.

"He was courting the youngest one," some one remarked

"Bad business for her. She was as pretty as a picture sometimes."

Dr. Sprague was in his office. Holland and the young man had grown very friendly in the few weeks of his stay in Lakeden. The doctor confirmed the story.

"Who is taking care of them?"

"Their mother."

"Yes, of course; but she has help, I suppose?"

"She is quite alone."

"You don't mean that that woman is alone, absolutely alone, in the house with two cases of small-pox?"

"I do mean just that. Remember that you are in the country and among Yankees. Prudence and a traditional horror of the disease will relieve her from all annoyance from callers."

"Where are the Masons?"

"Out of town, unfortunately. Lizzie Mason—the only one at home—and my landlady send in everything they have to eat. I take it myself."

"But they might get a professional nurse."

"They might—yes, if they had money. But one would have to come from the city, and the Allans are poor—probably you do not know how poor?"

"No."

"They own that place without a cent of income. That is all. Food, clothing, taxes, everything, those two girls have earned with their needles."

"Good Heavens!"

"Perhaps you can see now that there cannot be any wide margin for the luxuries or even the necessities of life."

George Holland walked twice the length of the narrow office before he spoke.

"There ought to be a man in the house."

"One would be a convenience, certainly."

"And I am going there."

Dr. Sprague looked at him curiously.

"I suppose you see all it involves?"

Holland turned sharply.

"See here. The day before I went to New York I did everything but ask Leah Allan to be my wife. If she gets well, I shall give her the chance to accept or refuse, as she chooses."

"She can't well refuse. Think twice."

"I don't want her to."

That afternoon Mrs. Allen, half asleep in her arm-chair between the two beds, heard a man's step behind her. She was too worn out to turn her head.

"I've had a hard day, doctor," she said, faintly.

There was no answer. Holland stood looking about the rooms. Every bit of superfluous furniture had been removed. The windows were darkened, but the carpetless floors and bare walls looked comfortless enough. A narrow bedstead stood on each side of the room. Under the white covering of each a motionless figure lay outstretched.

"It is I, Mrs. Allen. I have come to stay with you till this is over."

"You!" in blank amazement. "I don't understand."

"There is nothing very strange. Dr. Sprague told me. I have had the disease, and I am not in the least afraid of it. I have taken the liberty of sending to New York for a nurse. She will be here on the midnight train, and Dr. Sprague will bring her up."

"I don't understand."

"Then you will have to take me on trust," smiling "I am here, and you can't turn me out. I have a fire under the kettle boiling below. I am a tolerable cook along with my other good qualities, and I shall bring you a cup of tea in a few minutes."

The nurse came that night—a strong-armed, unemotional, skillful machine. But fearful days followed. Help in the kitchen was not of course to be thought of. Holland had all kinds of deft, helpful ways. He cooked with a woman's