

"I don't care for such distinctions, and I think she is a horrid old thing," quoth Clement, in his outspoken fashion. "Never mind, mother, you have Evy and me, and we're as jolly as we can be."

Rachel laughed outright.

"My dear, I don't mind in the least, I assure you, and I am very conscious of my blessings. I have made up my mind sitting here, Clement, that you shall go back to Eton with Will."

"Oh, mother, you *are* a brick."

There was no mistaking the heartiness of the ring which accompanied these words, and Rachel could not but be glad in her boy's gladness. And yet she knew very well that at Eton would Clement be made to feel the first sting of the difference between himself and his cousin.

"But what does Evy say to the separation?" she asked presently, looking over to the small maiden standing rather disconsolately by the table.

"I'll have nobody to play with," she announced simply, and with great gravity.

"Oh, but you'll look after Spottie and the puppies, and feed the rabbits, and all that, you know," said Clement, reassuringly. "And just think, you can ride Pippin *all* the time till I come back."

But these bright visions did not appear to console Evy altogether, for her red lip quivered. She was a singularly sweet-tempered, unselfish child, resembling her mother in disposition, but perhaps it was not to be wondered at that Rachel's heart clung with a more passionate love to the boy, who was his father's living image, and was fired by the same enthusiasm and impulsiveness of mood. Both were very dear to her, and it is just to say that never were two children treated with more perfect equality.

"I daresay Evy and I will manage to pass the time. I shall try and fill your place, Clem, when you are away," Rachel said, pleasantly; and just then a horse and rider came quickly up the approach, and Clem ran off eagerly to see who the unusual visitant could be. It was Mr. Gillot, the attorney from Ayreleigh, and Clement, ever ready when arrivals were announced, speedily relieved him of the horse, which he led to the stables, Evelyn following, as usual, her close companionship in all her brother's sports and interests having intensified her natural love for animals.

Rachel received Mr. Gillot at the door, and looked surprised, as she felt, to see him so late. He was her legal adviser, as well as the family solicitor to Studleigh—Christopher Abbot having left his daughter's affairs entirely in the hands of his trusted friend. The old man felt he could not sleep till he had had an interview with the "Captain's wife," as Rachel was always called, and had ridden over immediately after dinner.

"No, it isn't a friendly call; it's business, and not pleasant business, either, Mrs. Geoffrey," he said, answering her question almost brusquely. "Are you alone? I want to speak to you for half an hour."

"Certainly; come in. I hope there has been no serious disaster at the Thekla mines, Mr. Gillot," she answered with a smile. "Because I have just made up my mind that the next dividend should pay my son's fees at Eton."

"I wish it was nothing more than a flooding at the Thekla, or even an absconding mining engineer," said the old man, shaking his head. "I suppose you have not the least idea what I'm after?"

"Not the slightest," Rachel answered, and motioning the attorney to a seat, she drew up the blind at the front window to admit the last rays of the setting sun.

"Well, I had a visit this afternoon from Lady Emily."

"Yes?"

Rachel's smile faded; and she waited, apprehensive of some trouble, though she could not put it in shape.

"Do you know, Mrs. Geoffrey, that the lease of the farm expires next Lady Day?"

"What farm?"

"This farm—Pine Edge."

"Does it? No, I didn't know. Will there be some formalities connected with its renewal on account of my father's death?" asked Rachel; and

at her direct, unconcerned question Mr. Gillot almost groaned. The possibility that at any time she might be called upon to quit the place never suggested itself to her mind. It made his task all the harder, but it had to be gone through.

"Lady Emily called on me this afternoon, Mrs. Geoffrey, to say that she will not renew it," he said, desperately.

"Not renew it! I don't understand you, Mr. Gillot. What did Lady Emily mean?"

"What she said, unfortunately. She has made up her mind that you are to quit Pine Edge, Mrs. Geoffrey."

Rachel looked at the attorney with wide-open eyes, and the slight colour faded out of her face.

"That I am to quit Pine Edge," she repeated. "Oh, Mr. Gillot, you must have misunderstood her. Lady Emily would never suggest anything so absurd."

"My dear, she not only suggested it—she laid it down as an unalterable decision. You have grievously offended her in some way, and she is a haughty and vindictive woman. Our only chance lies with the young Squire."

Slowly the truth dawned upon Rachel, and the lawyer saw the quick, bright colour leap back to her cheek, and an expression to her face which he had never before seen.

"Lady Emily came to ask you to serve a notice to quit upon me, Mr. Gillot," she said, quietly. "Is that right?"

"Quite right."

"Did she give any reason for this extraordinary decision, may I ask?"

"She made a lame excuse about the place being neglected, but I pulled her up sharp on that head. Upon my word I did. I've been wondering at my own temerity ever since."

"Mr. Gillot, you were my father's old and true friend, as you have been mine since his death. What do you think can be the motive for this?"

"Well, my dear, since you ask me, I will tell you quite plainly—it's jealousy."

A faint, incredulous smile flitted across Rachel's pale face.

"That can hardly be. It is too absurd. How can the great lady of Studleigh Manor be jealous of an obscure woman, who affects and presumes nothing, but only tries to do her duty by her children, Mr. Gillot?"

"I am right, my dear; but I will be more explicit. She is jealous of the people's love for you. She hears you spoken of, as every one speaks of you—and well they may—with the highest gratitude and love. She is jealous because her boy likes to be with you, and she is jealous of these two fine children of yours—of that tall, manly, noble son, and that bonnie little girl, who, unless I am mistaken, will make sad havoc in Ayreleigh yet."

"But all that, supposing it to be true, is no fault of mine, Mr. Gillot. There can be no offence where none is intended, and it is most unjust and unreasonable of Lady Ayre to punish me when I have done no wrong."

"Agreed, but the fact remains. There is not much reason in women—that is in some women, begging your pardon," said the old man bluntly, but Rachel apparently did not hear or heed him. She had turned slightly away from him, and her eyes were looking through the front window upon the shadowy, solemn pine tops down upon the fertile valley of the Ayre, where the clear river wound its way between its green and lovely banks. Leave Pine Edge, her dear and only home, hallowed by countless memories—hallowed by associations most sacred. Oh, anything, anything but that!

"Mr. Gillot,"—Rachel's voice sounded very clear and sharp when she spoke again—"can I refuse to go?"

"No, my dear, you can't. Our only chance, as I said before, lies with the young squire, and even he is, in a manner, powerless. His mother has absolute control in the meantime, and I question if in this matter even his entreaties would avail much."

"I shall go to her myself, Mr. Gillot. I have not asked many favours from Lady Ayre. When she understands what this decision of her's means

for me she will never insist upon it, I feel sure. She would never be so cruel."

Mr. Gillot was not sanguine. In fact, looking at the young widow's haughty and slightly defiant mien, he did not think it probable that she would make a successful suppliant. But he did not demur.

"Lady Emily thinks you ought, for your son's sake, to be living at Stonecroft," he said, presently.

"It cannot matter much where we live. I cannot keep my son with me, even if I would. He will be nothing but a soldier, Mr. Gillot. His whole thoughts are of battles and sieges and hair-breadth escapes. It would be madness to try and put him past it."

"Well, well, knowing what his brave father was, we can't regret it," said the attorney, cheerfully. "I confess I should be disappointed if anything else were to satisfy him."

"I question, Mr. Gillot, whether Lady Ayre has the right to put the representative of the Abbots out of Pine Edge," Rachel said again, quickly and decisively. "Do three centuries of tenancy carry no right with them?"

"No, it's only use, and won't, Mrs. Geoffrey. So long as rent is paid for land, it's just like a house. My landlord can say to me any day, I want your house for myself; and, provided he gives me fair notice, I must walk out at his time without a word."

"It is hard, it is cruelly hard," exclaimed Rachel, bitterly. "You can testify how anxious and unremitting I have been in my care of the place. I have spared no expense where servants are concerned, in order that the land might not suffer. I have eyes, Mr. Gillot, and I can see for myself how the farm is looking, even if I had not any returns in hard cash to show for it. Never, even in my father's best days, did Pine Edge pay him so well as it has paid me."

"My dear, I know it. I told her ladyship all that, but I was speaking to a dead wall. She has made up her mind that you are to go."

"Then there are other things to think of. Look at the house, for instance. The Abbots have made it what it is, and—"

"These arguments won't hold, Mrs. Geoffrey," interrupted the attorney, shaking his head. "Everybody knows that Pine Edge is fit for any gentleman to live in, and everybody knows whose money paid for it. But the Abbots did it without being asked, simply for their own good and profit. These are hard truths, my dear, but they are truths. Suppose you go out of the Edge to-morrow, you can't lay claim to a single penny as compensation for improvements."

"The money is nothing. It is not a question of money," returned Rachel passionately. "I have looked forward to spending my life here, Mr. Gillot, and hoped to die in my old home when the time came. It will break my heart if I have to leave it. I cannot, I cannot!"

Never had Mr. Gillot seen the daughter of his old friend so deeply moved. He had not hitherto understood her. She had appeared to him sometimes to be very cold and reserved, and self-contained. But he knew now how passionate was the heart beneath, how quick and strong the feelings, how close and clinging the attachment, not to human beings alone, but to places which memory hallowed. He was filled with a deep compassion for her, as he looked on her flushed face, and saw the nervous motions of her hands as she moved up and down the room.

"Were I you, Mrs. Geoffrey, I would lay the whole matter before the young Squire," he suggested.

"No; because then Lady Emily might justly accuse me of seeking to influence her son, and I love him too well to put him in such a painful position. No, I shall be open and frank with her and shall plead my own cause. I am a proud woman, Mr. Gillot, perhaps prouder than Lady Emily herself, but to-morrow I shall bury that pride and go as a suppliant to Studleigh, where I have never been admitted as an equal. Yes, it will cost me something; but it would cost me very much more to leave my dear old home. If she has a woman's heart at all I shall touch it to compassion before I go."

(To be continued.)