

DOCTOR ZAY.

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XII.—(Continued.)

She shook her head with a melancholy smile. "You do not understand. You have not had my chances to see how it is. I do not think lightly of these things. Next to the love between man and his Creator (if there is such a thing, and I believe we must admit that there is), the love of one man and one woman is the loftiest and the most illusive ideal that has been set before the world. A perfect marriage is like a pure heart; those who have it are fit to see God. Any other is profanity to me; it is a desecration to think of. I should be tortured. It would kill me to miss it. It is a matter in which I cannot risk anything, or I must reduce the risk to a minimum. Oh, women of my sort are thought not to reverence marriage, to undervalue it, to substitute our little personal ambitions for all that blessedness! I never spoke of these things before. I am not ashamed to tell you. Oh, it is we who know the worth of it!—we who look on out of our solitary lives, perhaps through our instructed experience and trained emotion. We will not—I will not have any happiness that is not the most perfect this world can give me. I will not stoop to anything I can fathom and measure. Love should be like a mighty sea. It should overflow everything. Nothing should be able to stand before it. Love is a miracle. All laws yield to it. I should scorn to take anything that I feared for, or guarded,—to look on and say, At such a time, such a consequence will follow such a cause. Then he will feel so and so. And then I shall suffer this and that,—and to know, by all the knowledge my life's work has brought me, that it would all come as I foresaw,—that we should ever look at one another like the married people I have known. Oh, I have watched that bitterness too often! I know all the steps,—I have had their confidence. You don't know what things people tell their doctors. I have heard too much. Years ago, I said, I will never suffer that descent."

"Do you mean," asked Yorke, trying to speak with a courage which he did not feel, "that you took a vow never to marry at all?"

"On no," she said, with her ready candor, "I am not one of those women. It is not honest to assume that there is any perfect life without happiness. It is idle to pretend that happiness and loneliness are not contradictory terms. I have always known that I should marry if the miracle happened. I never expected it to happen. I put it out of my mind. I have known I should be a solitary woman. I am prepared for it. I would rather live twenty lonely lives than to suffer that desecration,—to see you look some morning as if it wearied you. I have seen them! I know the look. It would murder me."

"The miracle has happened!" He approached her with a passionate movement. "Trust it."

She shook her head.

"We love each other," he urged,—"we love each other!"

"We think so," she said sadly. "You think so. But you do not know what it all means. If I had been like the other women—Oh, I am sorry you have wasted all this feeling on me. If it had been some lovely girl, who had nothing to do but to adore you,—who could give you everything!"

"I should have tired of her in six weeks," said Yorke.

"And I will give you sixteen to tire of me!" she said quickly. But when she saw how this wounded him she was sorry she had said it, and hastened to add more calmly, "You see, Mr. Yorke, you have been so unfortunate as to become interested in a new kind of woman. The trouble is that a happy marriage with such a woman demands a new type of man. By and by you would chafe under this transitional position. You would come home, some evening, when I should not be there (but I should feel worse not to be there than you would to miss me). You would need me when I was called somewhere urgently. You would reflect, and react, and waver, and then it would seem to you that you were neglected, that you were wronged. You would think of the other men, whose wives were always punctual at dinner, in long dresses, and could play to them evenings, and accept invitations, and always be on hand, like the kitten. I should not blame you. Some of the loveliest women in the world are like that. I should like somebody myself to come home to, to be always there to purr about me; it is very natural to me to accept the devotion of such women. There was one who wanted to come down here and stay with me. I wouldn't let her; but I wanted her. With you it is more; it is an instinct of heredity. Generations of your fathers have bred it in you. You would not know how to cultivate happiness with a woman who had diverged from her hereditary type. Happiness must be cultivated. It is like character. It is not a thing to be safely let alone for a moment, or it will run to weeds. It would slip out of our hands like thistle-down, and I should be made to feel—you would feel, and your mother and all the people you had been taught to care for—that I was to blame; that it was a life-long mistake for you to have married a woman with a career, who had anything else to do but be your wife!"

"My mother, of all women, I know would be the first to uphold you," interrupted Yorke. "She believes in all that sort of thing about women. I never thought of it till this minute. It used to mortify me when I was a boy; then it only bored me. I shall kiss her for it when I get home! You need not give a second thought to my mother. She has never got over what you did for me last summer, and she's dying to see you, in any capacity. If you came to her in that of a daughter, she would set you on a pinnacle, and fall down and worship you."

"It has been very manly in you," said Doctor Zay musingly, "never once to ask me to give up my work. I shall not forget it."

"I never thought of asking it," said Yorke. "It's not because I have any particular theories, and I should be ashamed to let you credit me with any sort of nobility about it. I don't want it any other way. It would undo everything. It would make another woman of you. I want you just as you are. Come!" he said, with a different tone. He leaned above her. She had never seen such wells of tenderness in any man's eyes. She tried to look into them, but her own fell.

"You make it so hard for me!" she cried, in a quick, anguished tone.

Then Yorke drew back. "You do not trust me," he said hoarsely. "You do not believe that I love you."

She stretched out her hands to him in a mute appeal.

"I have waited on your caution and protest long enough," he went on excitedly. "I went home last summer, as you bade me. I let you think I thought you might be right. I let you treat my love like a fit of the measles. You supposed I was going away to convalesce like a boy, and establish your theory. I never believed it for one moment! I knew all the time that what you call the miracle had got me. It has got you, too, thank Heaven! You can't escape it. You can't help it. Try, if you want to. I'll leave you to work it out. A man can stand a good deal, but there comes a point beyond which he must retreat in self-defense. I have reached that point."

He turned from her, glowing with swift wrath. His face looked as if it were carved out of hot white lava; it seemed to her as if it would cool off in that color and expression, and remain by her forever, like a medallion. The rare tears sprang to her burning eyes. She felt how desolate she was to be.

At the door he paused, and looked, relenting, back.

"How tired you are!" he said, with infinite tenderness. "I would have rested you, poor girl!"

"Oh, don't!" she cried piteously. He approached her; she motioned with her warning hands. He stood hesitating, and she saw how perplexed and tossed he was.

"If you had truly loved me," he said savagely, "we should not have parted in this way. It would not have been possible to you. You could not have tortured me so. You would have trusted me. You would have risked anything. We should have taken hold of our problem together. Our love would have carried us through all these little things—you talk of. I have over-estimated the miracle—that is all."

Before he had finished speaking she glided up to him; her deep-colored dress and waving feminine motions gave her the look of some tall velvet rose, blown by the wind. She put both her hands in his, threw her head back, and looked at him. For that one moment she gave her soul the freedom of her eyes.

"You shall know," she whispered. "You shall know for this once! . . . Do you see?"

He drew away one hand, and covered his face.

"It is because I love you that I—hurt you so. It is because I love you that we must part in this way. It is for your sake that I will not let you make a life's mistake. Oh, how could I bear it! I should waste myself in trying to make you happy. I could not live unless I made you the happiest man in all this world,—no, don't interrupt me; I know what you would say—but it would not be so. I will never marry a man unless I can make him divinely happy! I will not wrong him so. I will not wrong myself. This is right that I am doing. I am accustomed to making difficult choices and abiding by decisions. It is hard at first, but I am trained to it; I know how to do it. Don't worry about me; I shall get along. Go, now,—go quickly! I can't bear any more of this." She drew back from him by a subtle movement, and gathered herself commandingly. He hesitated for a moment, opened his lips to speak, said nothing, obeyed her, and went.

XIII.

He decided not to see her again, and left by the morning stage.

When he had got back to Boston, he wrote to her what he thought a very deep letter. She answered it by a beautifully straightforward, simple note, in which there seemed to be nothing

concealed, because there was nothing to conceal.

He wrote at intervals during the remainder of the winter; she answered him kindly. He tried to keep himself informed of the state of her health, but did not succeed in the least. She inquired minutely after his. Once she sent him a prescription marked *ars. 2 m.*, for influenza. She exhibited the best of good comaraderie, and was vigorously destitute of tenderness. She seemed to have accepted a certain relation of kindness and frank mutual interest, with that mysterious faculty by which women substitute such things for a passion. He was far more disheartened than if she had intrenched herself behind a significant silence.

In April Mr. Butterwell had occasion to write concerning the purchase, in Boston, of a horse to replace the sorrel. Mrs. Butterwell added a postscript. She said that the doctor was growing very peaked, and had gone to Bangor on a week's vacation, visiting a college classmate. She said the doctor had done a terrible winter's work. She said she hoped the Lord knew how the small-pox got to Sherman, for she was sure she didn't. She said Dr. Penhallow had gone to Europe.

In May Mr. Butterwell wrote again, to say that the new horse was satisfactory, but that the lawyer was drunk; and if Mr. Yorke felt any uneasiness about his uncle's estate—

Mr. Yorke did experience great uneasiness about his uncle's estate. He took the first boat of the season, and steamed away promptly for Machias. He arrived there in the afternoon, and got a horse and boy, and started for Sherman. He reached the cross-roads at dusk, dismissed his driver, and, carrying his light bag, walked as briskly as the atrocious state of the roads permitted towards the village.

In going by a little group of lumbermen's cottages, he noticed a covered buggy standing at a ragged gate.

He would have passed it without a second thought, but for a sudden consciousness that the horse was an acquaintance whom he was likely to cut. He perceived then that it was indeed Old Oak. He looked into the buggy and recognized the blankets and fox-robe; for it was winter still in the reluctant Maine May. Without a moment's hesitation, he got into the buggy, and wrapped himself up in the robes and waited.

He had to wait a long time. It grew dark. Several people passed, but no one noticed him. Some men were hanging about the house, and a woman or two; they seemed to be neighbors. He could not make out what was the matter, but inferred that these good people had some source of serious excitement connected with the lumberman's cottage. He asked no questions, not wishing to be seen. Now and then, he thought he heard cries in the cottage.

It might have been half an hour, it might have been more; but she came out at last. She had on a brown felt hat, with a long feather. She walked fast, nodding to the loafers, and speaking curtly; and, coming up, swung herself into the buggy, in her supple way. She had sat down beside him, and begun to tug at the robes, before she saw that she was not alone in the dark carriage.

"Don't let me startle you," said Yorke.

She sat quite still, half leaning forward, for an instant; then sank back. She did not speak, nor take the reins. He perceived that she trembled from head to foot.

"I have done wrong!" he cried remorsefully.

"I did not—expect—to see you," she panted.

"I was not quite myself. I have been going through a terrible scene. Where are the reins?"

"I have them. I shall keep them, by your leave." He touched Old Oak, and they started off slowly, plunging through the deep spring mud.

"You will upset us in this quagmire," she complained. "I know every stone and hole. Give me the reins."

He did so, without comment. She drove steadily, but feebly. She began to talk at once.

"There's a man in that house in delirium tremens. It is the worst case I ever had. They called me at three o'clock. I've just got him quiet. He was firing a revolver all over the house when I went."

Yorke uttered a smothered cry.

"At everything and everybody," said Doctor Zay. "Ball after ball, as fast as he could pull the trigger. They were all frightened. Nobody could do anything. I—He is all right now. Nobody has been hurt. I got it away from him. He is asleep. I—Mr. Yorke—will you please—to take—the reins?" She sank backwards, and slowly leaned and fell against the buggy's side.

"Don't be disturbed," she gasped. "I shall not faint. I never did—in my life. I am only—out of breath. I shall be—all right—soon."

He resolutely put his arm about her, and got her into a more comfortable position. She panted, and was very pale, but had herself under soldierly control. He saw that she was right; she would not faint.

"Either, alone, would not have been—too much," she said apologetically. "But both together—to find you there—and then I was up all night with a patient who suffered horribly. And I haven't—eaten very much to-day. I am ashamed of myself!" she added, in a stronger voice.

"I'm glad you had a buggy," observed Yorke maliciously.

"Oh, I had to," she said innocently. "Since the diphtheria my throat has been a little troublesome—and these cold spring winds—Thank you, Mr. Yorke, I am quite myself, now. I can sit up alone."

"I don't think you can," he said decidedly.

"Mr. Yorke"—

"Dear!"

"Oh, hush!"

"I have overtaken Atalanta this time. She stopped for a leaden apple,—for a revolver ball, and I got the start. Do you suppose I am going to forego my advantage so soon? Do you think you are going to send me off again, after all we have gone through? Do you think I will give you up to your pistols, and your diphtheria and small-pox,—you—*you*,—my darling, my poor, brave, lonely girl? Do you think I will ever leave this accursed State of Maine again without you? You don't know what kind of a man you're dealing with, then,—that's all," he added, by way of anti-climax. But his heart bounded to see that she did not protest and battle; nor, indeed, did she answer him just then, at all. She was worn out, poor girl.

He did not disturb her silence, which he felt stealing upon himself deliciously, as if it were the first fumes from the incense of her surrender. How should she breathe when the censor swung close?

"Mr. Yorke," at last, "are you sure?"

"As I am of my life."

"That it is *me* you want,—a strong-minded doctor?"

"A sweet-hearted woman! It is only you."

"How do you know I shall not make a—what was it?—'cold,' 'unnatural,' 'unwomanly' wife? How can you expect anything else, sir?"

"I never saw a woman in my life who would do as much, give as much, to make a man happy as you would,—as you will."

"I wonder how you dare!" she whispered.

She turned her neck, with a reluctant movement, to look at him, as if he had been some object of fear.

"Oh, I dare more than that."

"How long have you—cared—for me?"

"From the very first."

She sighed. "I wish I could say as much! I can't. It took me some time. I cared most about the case, till you got better. And then I was so busy! But"—

"But what?"

"Oh, I could make up for that. I wouldn't be"—

"Don't stop," rapturously. "What wouldn't you be?"

"I wouldn't be outdone in any such way. If we ran the risk, I mean,—if it seemed to be best for you. I don't believe it is! I think it would be the worst thing that could happen to you. Why don't you get out of the buggy, and go back to Boston? What did you come here for?"

"To look after my uncle's estate, to be sure."

"Oh! . . . You must be very anxious about it!"

"I am very anxious."

The buggy lurched and lunged remorselessly over the dark and swampy road. She sat erect and white. She did not lean against anything. She did not speak, nor turn her face towards him. He dimly felt that only another woman could understand her at that moment, and had a vague jealousy of the strong withdrawal which nature had set between her strength and his tenderness, as if he found a rival in it.

"Dear," he said once more, with that lingering accent on the word which gave to his urgency more the force and calm of an assured, long-married love than of a crude young passion, "you told me that love was like a mighty sea. It has overflowed everything. Nothing has been able to stand before it. It is a miracle,—like eternal life. Dear, are you ready to believe in the miracle?"

"Be patient with me," said Doctor Zay. "I have a scientific mind. The supernatural doesn't come easily to it. How shall I begin?"

"Say after me, 'I believe in the life everlasting,—that means my love, you know. I want to hear you say it, first of all.'"

"I believe—in—*you*. Will that do?"

"I will try to make it do," said Yorke.

"But I don't believe in your driving," observed the doctor. "There is a ditch four feet and a half deep, with a well in it, off the right, here. You are making straight for it. Give me the reins! If you don't mind—please."

"I don't care who has the reins," he cried, with a boyish laugh, "as long as I have the driver!"

They had got home, by this, though neither perceived it, till Old Oak stopped in the delaying spring twilight, and sighed the long sigh of the virtuous horse, who rests from his labors, aware that his oats shall follow him. Yorke accompanied the doctor, without hesitation, to her own rooms. She experienced some surprise at this, and vaguely resented his manner, which was that of a man who belonged there, and who intended to be where he belonged. He held the office door open for her to pass through, and then shut it resolutely. All the scent and warmth that he remembered were in the rooms. In the uncertain light she looked tall and far from him. He felt that all her nature recoiled from him at that moment, with the accelerated force of a gathering wave.

"It is not too late," she panted. "You can save yourself from this great risk. You can go. I wish you would go! This is not like simple happiness, such as comes to other people. It is a problem, that we have undertaken,—so hard, so long! No light feeling can solve it; no caprice or selfishness can live before it. If we fail, we shall be the most miserable people that ever mistook a little attraction for a great love."