

What would you do, Edie?

Your worried friend,

ELSA.

My dear Edith: Dr. Harding came last night and asked if I would marry him. He helped me to answer. The answer was no.

I did not think that any man had so much insight and sympathy.

'I can see that you are doubtful and distressed,' he said; 'and I know that you have no one to consult. Hadn't you better talk it over with me—as your consulting physician?'

We talked it over, and I was quite honest with him. I told him that I had thought of marrying him for Harry's sake, and a little for his own, because I admired him and appreciated him and would wish to make him happy; but that I felt it was wrong to marry for such reasons, and that I had married once, and hadn't been too happy (I have never said that to anyone before, not even to you), and that I had made up my mind that I should never marry again except for love so strong that I could not help myself.

'If we could make ourselves love,' I told him, 'I should love you like that. I don't know why I don't; for my regard for you is extreme. I don't mean mere respect, I mean friendship, and more—friendly affection.'

'Then I will try to keep that,' he said. 'If you married me, feeling so, I should lose that friendly affection. What a good, honest woman you are! Since you have a friendly affection for me, you will grant me a favor. I must do little things to help the boy, to bring him up properly, and give him a start in life; and perhaps—. Let me help you, and save you from drudgery, Elsa.'

'Dear friend, no,' I said. 'If I cannot earn enough for the boy, or if I break down, you shall do a little for him—so much as you would do from your affection for him, leaving me out; no more. But I must never take help from you for myself, never! Be kind to my self-respect.'

He just kissed my hand and went.

How I wish I did love him! The worst thing of all is that, if we had met in different circumstances, I believe I might have; but I started thinking of him as a husband just because he could do things for Harry, and now even if I did love him, I shouldn't be able to believe I did.

I have formed a desperate resolution. I can't let him see me and want me, and refuse to marry him, and yet take his charity for Harry. I have been offered another post. I shall take it and go away and leave no address, and let him forget me.

I shall miss his friendship so much!

Your unhappy friend,

ELSA.

My dear Edith: I am in such trouble! Since I moved I haven't been well, and Harry misses the things that the doctor used to send him, and he misses the doctor, too. He is always asking for him. He seems fretful, and asks for things I can't buy him. I work my heart out, and it's no use.

My new employer was very kind to me from the first. To-day I fainted at the office, and he made me go to his room to rest afterward. He told me that I was killing myself to keep my boy, and then he offered to marry me and keep us both in comfort.

I'm beaten, Edith. I can't do enough for Harry. I must sell myself for him. I didn't refuse Mr. Richards; but asked for time to think it over.

I knew then what I meant to do. I suppose you will be shocked. I went straight to Dr. Harding.

'The boy?' he said, as soon as he saw me. 'What's wrong?'

'It isn't Harry,' I said. 'It's myself.'

And then I told him that I was breaking down, and knew that I couldn't earn enough to bring up my boy properly, and I meant to marry for his sake, and Mr. Richards had asked me to. 'But if you still want me,' I said, 'I'd rather marry you, because—' I was hysterical, you will gather—'because it will kill me

to marry anyone else; and it won't kill me to marry you; and I don't love Mr. Richards, and I can't and I won't, and I wouldn't if I could. I would love you if I could, and I'll try.'

I don't know what I did after that. I believe I clung to him, and I dare say I begged him to marry me, and any way I went off in a hysterical attack. Anyhow, I found myself shivering in a chair, with a rug wrapped round me and a hassock under my feet, and a taste in my mouth of medicine that I didn't remember taking. He had some tea brought in for me before he would let me talk, and made me sit by the fire and drink it.

He said that I shouldn't marry anyone else, and if marrying him was the only alternative, of course I should; but he thought we should both be happier as friends, since my regard for him was only friendly.

'But,' he said, 'if you regard my happiness in the least, Elsa, you must let me help you, and see you comfortable and happy. Otherwise, my life will be very miserable. You don't know, you have no idea, what a cruel blow you inflicted on me by running away!'

'I have missed you very much,' I owned. 'That is what has broken me down. I will not run away again. Let me have to-night to think it over and get calmer.'

He drove me home; and he has sent me all sorts of things—cooked chicken, jellies, wine, grapes, and toys for Harry! The boy has gone to bed happy by him.

What am I to do, Edith? I can't marry him, because he doesn't want me to. (If he did, I could now.) I can't take his money and not marry him. I can't marry anyone else. Do you know I would give my life for him! If I don't marry anyone, Harry will starve.

What shall I do?

Your miserable

ELSA.

Dear Edith: You have made it all right! When Aunt Mary got your letter she sent me two thousand dollars. It was money that father lent her, with interest. She had been trying to find me for years to pay me; but could not get my address. A lawyer came and identified me, and paid over the money the very morning I wrote to you my last poor, miserable, hysterical letter.

I went round to Dr. Harding at once and told him. I laughed like a girl; and, when I glanced at myself in his mirror, I might have been one. He sat looking at me; and his eyes were positively hungry. I was quite sure then that he still wanted me to marry him, whatever he had said the day before, when I was hysterical.

'I sha'n't have to marry anyone for Harry's sake now,' I said, 'shall I? I have made my vow over again. I will never marry unless I love him. So, as you won't have me, I shall never be able to marry at all.'

'Elsa!' he cried.

He held out his hands, and I put mine in them.

'A doctor's fee!' I cried.

I mean to be a fee worth having. I love him so!

Your happy friend,

ELSA.

—Exchange.

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