

Celia should not suffer such a burden. It would have been his pride to protect and help her through life. She should never be obliged to take up the task of protecting and caring for so helpless a thing as he was now. He would recover, they told him, from all his injuries save one, but that one insured his helplessness. He would not let Celia share that or make dismal her own life in an effort to lighten his. Though it cost him everything, he must release her from the engagement. It was the only thing to do. Somehow the finest and noblest course of action always appeared to Jerry in the lowly guise of 'the only thing to do.'

Nevertheless several days went by before he put his plan into execution. He wanted to be quite sure of himself, sure that he could write without seeming to plead for pity. He composed several letters before he finally commanded Billy, who sat with him every evening, to take pen and paper and begin.

'Are you all ready, Bill—Miss Peters?' asked Jerry, with a superb attempt at facetiousness.

'Stop it!' snarled Billy. What do you think I'm made of?

'Good stuff, old pal,' said Jerry, feeling for his friend's hand in the still unaccustomed darkness.

This is the letter (Mr. Costigan's voice never so much as quavered as the words came evenly from his lips, but the beads of sweat started out on his forehead, and Billy's handwriting would have disgraced a three-year-old):

'Dearest Celia (ran the letter):

'I have met with an accident. There was an explosion at the factory, and I got in the way of it. As a result, my sight has been destroyed. I will be blind all my life. ('Don't put that last sentence down,' said Jerry, 'it sounds whiney!')—but Billy disobediently wrote it in.) Of course this means that our engagement must be broken off. Now I know, sweetheart, that you will pity me, and perhaps you will think I am wrong about our engagement, but you must trust me to know best about it. I love you far too dearly to be willing to let you sacrifice yourself, so we'll just be friends hereafter.

'I know this will be a hard letter for you to read. I do not need to tell you how hard it was to write, but some things can't be helped—can they?

'You must not think of shortening your trip. I don't look my best just now, but by September I hope to be as beautiful as of yore.

'This is my first attempt at letter writing by proxy, and Billy says I must quit. He is taking care of me.

'If you don't mind, I'd like to have you keep your ring.

'Good-bye, dear little friend. God bless and keep you always, and comfort you—and me.

'Always your loving

JERRY.'

Billy was sorely tempted to add a surreptitious postscript, but refrained. 'If she's the real thing, she won't need it,' he sagely assured himself; 'and if she isn't, why it's good riddance.'

Presently the nurse entered and drove Billy away, saw to Jerry's bandages, rearranged his pillows, and made him as comfortable as possible for the night. When he was sure that he was alone Mr. Costigan had to set his teeth hard that no moan might escape him. He stretched out his empty arms in the darkness. There was no one to come to them; there never would be any one. He had given Celia her freedom: that was over. Perhaps after a time he would become inured to that agony, perhaps his faith would give him strength to bear it.

Three weeks must elapse before he could look for a reply. To Jerry, in the prison of the dark, they seemed, as they dragged themselves past his bed, like an eternity. In a fortnight he was able to make a first essay in walking about with the aid of a nurse and a cane. It seemed very strange to Mr. Costigan, in the prime of his young manhood, to tap his way along so sightlessly; to sit by the window and feel the sunlight on his face and yet not see it. He must get used to stranger things than that, he realised—life without Celia, for one.

He had many visitors. Billy was indefatigable in his attentions, and even the general manager of the factory deigned to call.

'You must hurry and get about, Costigan,' said the latter worthy, a puffy individual of whom Jerry held no high opinion. 'We need you back at the shop.'

Jerry smiled grimly.

'Oh, I mean it,' continued the other, conscious of Jerry's scepticism. 'We can't afford to let you go. We've all agreed that nobody but you can advise us on some points. And there's a hundred shares of stock to your credit on our books. We paid 12 per cent. last year. There's no thanks about it. It's strictly business,' and the puffy one, in a frenzy of embarrassment, hurriedly took his departure.

Two letters came from Celia, but they had evidently been written before the arrival of his, so Jerry did not open them. He made Billy put them away. He would have them read to him some day when they would not so tear his wound.

Then the time came when he might look for the awaited answer, and Jerry took to counting the visits of the postman. But no letter with a European postmark arrived. Billy's worst suspicions were soon confirmed.

'She never cared for him—or anybody else. She thought he was a good catch, and now she assumes he isn't. At that, she might have the decency to write.' Such was the general tenor of Mr. Peter's self-communings. If Jerry had any such thoughts, he kept them resolutely suppressed. Probably he never doubted her loyalty. He invented a hundred reasons, more for Billy's benefit than his own, why the answer might have been delayed, but as the three weeks became four he came to believe in them less and less. Perhaps she had thought it was better not to write he finally reasoned, or perhaps she had found it too cruelly hard. He did not want her to write if it hurt her too much to do so, yet had she known how he longed for even a word, surely she would have sent some message. But no word came.

Jerry sat at his favorite post by the window with the morning sunlight on his scarred face. He had been blind a month, a month of horror and grief, lightened by the indomitable power of the faith that was his, the faith that rose undaunted to strengthen and sustain him in his trial. Through it he was learning to bear his burden without flinching.

This morning he was humming a tune, the old Irish song he had whistled so joyously on the night he first knew Celia loved him. Fragments of the words came back to him, and he fitted them into the melody:

'I left the town, and wandered on

Through fields all green and gay,

And whom should I meet but my Colleen-dhas

By the dawning of the day.'

He was far from self-pity, but he could not help thinking that he could never see the dawning, that his Colleen-dhas was lost to him forever. He hummed the sweet old tune over and over, as if there were a kind of comfort in its simple cadences:

'And whom should I meet but my Colleen-dhas—'

The door behind him opened and closed very softly, and then, as he turned, somebody's arms were round his neck, somebody's voice spoke in his ear.

'Jerry! Oh, Jerry!'

'Celia!' he choked, stricken with wonder.

Celia did not heed his exclamation.

'Jerry, I took the first boat. Didn't you get my letter? Or my cablegram? Oh, my dear! My dear!'

Celia had determined to be very brave indeed for his sake, but the tears would force themselves into eyes and voice despite her. And Jerry, caught unawares, rallied his strength during their swift mutual explanations to battle for honor's sake and Celia's. She was making his duty terribly hard as she told of the letters he never received, of her wild rush across three thousand miles to reach him.

'And how dared you suggest breaking our engagement?' stormed 'the girl who didn't care.'

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