

By Maurice Walsh

The room was almost dark but Sheridan, from the stool upon which he sat, could see the outline of Emily's white face against the window pane. The thunder of the ore stampers reached them from the gully below.

"You needn't bother with the broom, Emily, but you mustn't let 'Lisabeth see your face. Steady, my girl; it'll be all right".

Sheridan looked his gaarled hands over his knees. "Perhaps you'd better go and meet Tom; it'll give me time to think".

The girl's head dropped, and her cheeks suddenly burned. "Oh, Mr Sheridan, if I had only known; if --"

"Don't be a little fool, girl. I want you and my lad to come in that door together. Run and meet him before she comes".

Emily passed from the room, her head down, as if afraid of Sheridan's kindly face. He did not look up; his slow mind was grappling with certain happenings which were not very clear to him.

The quiet night blotted out the bush. Someone was singing in the gully below as a woman climbed up the boulder-strewn track and entered the back door. She stamped her strong boots in the passage and she blinked in the half-light as her strong hands jerked her bonnet strings asunder. Sheridan winced as she flung herself into the dim room.

"Where is that girl? Out again, I suppose".

"I sent her to meet Tom. He is late tonight." Sheridan straightened his bent shoulders.

"Sent her out to meet Tom? Good God! Why? I won't have that kussy a-meeting him. I won't! I won't!" She bit out each word with ferocious emphasis. Her small eyes blazed rebelliously.

Sheridan's rough hands opened and shut. "They're fond of each other, 'Lisabeth, Perhaps you've noticed she's a bit different lately?"

The woman stooped as if she were dodging a blow; the sneer on her lips <sup>E</sup> <sub>A</sub> mached the lines about her thin mouth.

"Noticed her? God, it's the talk of the township. This comes of bringing girls from the city to help out in the bush" She stood in the centre of the room, her fingers dug into her narrow hips.

"What will we do, 'Lisabeth?"

"Do?" She swung around as if to strike him. "Pack her off to the city by tonight's train. That's what we'll do".

"And what will become of her then, 'Lisabeth. Have you thought of that?"

"My God, you're getting particular now. Did I engage her to make love to my son? She can go to a hospital there, where it can be born. I'll give her ten pounds, but she'll go tonight".

Sheridan drew a sharp breath.

"You're a merciless woman, 'Lisabeth. All your life you've been the same. This girl came to us innocent enough when you were mighty sick and needed help. We're to blame. Tom's our son and she's been living under our roof. If you send her away there'll be harm - I can see it in her eyes. She's well educated - she trembles when you rip out a hot word and she's not a girl to take her shame like the bushies hereabouts. We're both old, and I wouldn't like to drag her from a waterhole, or lift her from the bottom of a shaft. She's the type that might do it, you know".

Sheridan stood up, his white head bent across the window sill; he made his appeal without a gesture.

The thin-lipped woman stamped her foot on the hearth. "Where's the pity for ME that's starved and slaved to bring my boy up? Oh, you fool, I hate your ways! Thank God I'm strong and open-eyed!

"And there is to be no mercy for Emily, 'Lisabeth? Think, and open your heart"

"Think of what, Sheridan? Of her being married to my lad? No, not that! Let him marry a woman that'll lift him. Must he slave in a mine like a beast like you did year after year? Do you feel as I do when I run in there and cover my head? Give her a chance, you say, aye, and give my lad a chance, too, Sheridan. Give him a chance, too".

Sheridan left the window and moved towards her. "You and me have been with each other for nigh on forty years haven't we, 'Lisabeth. Nigh on forty years, eh, old girl".

There was no answer from the darkness.

"You aren't my wife, 'Lisabeth, because people didn't worry much about

church in those days. It hasn't worried us much because although life's been pretty hard over all those years, we've had each other. I shouldn't have mentioned it if Emily's trouble hadn't cropped up ... by our own son, under our own roof. Think of it, 'Lisabeth'.

Sheridan straightened his shoulders. "You've had all the say here over the years and I've gone quiet, but no longer. Emily must have us in her hour of need."

No answer.

"What a merciless woman you are. You'd sacrifice them both because you itch to see your son in flash clothes. Tom loves the girl but he's afraid of you; we are all afraid of you. But for me no longer, so don't stand in my way".

His hammering heart belied the threatening voice. He knew that she was crouching near the hearth in the darkness, white-lipped and quailing in her savage despair, and the knowledge of it cut him through. She had battled with him for forty years in flood and drought and fire. She had starved with him and had nursed him in a mean hut on the Macquarie and had kept his camp on twenty fields. She loved him still in her own fierce way, <sup>but</sup> Emily must not be cut adrift with their son's child. For once in his life he would play the firm, hard man.

He stepped to the door and peered into the darkness. Voices reached him, a woman's and then a man's. Up and up the voices approached, and the man was laughing nervously.

"Is that you, Emily and Tom?" Sheridan saw that Tom was holding her waist as he helped her across a deep flood trench.

"You're late tonight, Tom, aren't you?" A clean-faced youngster <sup>ed</sup> stepped <sub>a</sub>round a large boulder.

"Yes, Dad," he replied. "But we've been scheming, and Emily can't scheme a bit. She's in a funk, and so am I".

"You needn't worry about that, lad. Your mother ain't so hard, not so hard. You'd better come inside".

They entered carefully and grouped themselves silently in the centre of the room. Sheridan leaned across the table and spoke gently to the huddled shape near the hearth.

"Are you there, 'Lisabeth? Aren't you going to offer Tom and Emily a hot cup of tea?"

The woman moved. Her fingers sought a matchbox on the mantelpiece above her head. Emily moved forward and brushed dry sticks together on the hearth. The flame of the match lit up the two faces, and showed their tears <sup>were</sup> falling.