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The Consolation Prize.

By E. M. Dell



SO YOU don't want to marry me?" said Earl Wyverton.

He said it by no means bitterly. There was even the suggestion of a smile on his clean-shaven face. He looked

down at the girl who stood before him, with eyes that were faintly quizzical. She was bending at the moment to cut a tall Madonna lily from a sheaf that grew close to the path. At his quiet words she started and the flower fell.

He stopped and picked it up, considered it for a moment, then slipped it into the basket that was slung on her arm.

"Don't be agitated," he said, gently. "You needn't take me seriously—unless you wish."

She turned a face of piteous entreaty towards him. She was trembling uncontrollably. "Oh, please, Lord Wyverton," she said, earnestly, "please, don't ask me! Don't ask me! I—I felt so sure you wouldn't."

"Did you?" he said. "Why?" He looked at her with grave interest. He was a straight, well-made man; but his kindest friend could not have called him anything but ugly, and there were a good many who thought him formidable also. Nevertheless there was that about him—an honesty and a strength—which made up to a very large extent for his lack of other attractions.

"Tell me why," he said. "Oh, because you are so far above me," the girl said, with an effort. "You must remember that. You can't help it. I have always known that you were not in earnest."

"Have you?" said Lord Wyverton, smiling a little. "Have you? You seem to have rather a high opinion of me, Miss Neville."

She turned back to her flowers. "There are certain things," she said, in a low voice, "that one can't help knowing."

"And one of them is that Lord Wyverton is too fond of larking to be considered seriously at any time?" he questioned.

She did not answer. He stood and watched her speculatively.

"And so you won't have anything to say to me?" he said at last. "In fact, you don't like me?"

She glanced at him with grey eyes that seemed to plead for mercy. "Yes, I like you," she said, slowly. "But—"

"Never mind the 'but,'" said Wyverton, quietly. "Will you marry me?"

She turned fully round again and faced him. He saw that she was very pale.

"Do you mean it?" she said. "Do you?"

He frowned at her, though his eyes remained quizzical and kindly. "Don't be frightened," he said. "Yes; I am actually in earnest. I want you."

She stiffened at the words and grew paler still; but she said nothing.

It was Wyverton who broke the silence. There was something about her that made him uneasy.

"You can send me away at once," he said, "if you don't want me. You needn't mind my feelings, you know."

"Send you away!" she said. "I!"

He gave her a sudden, keen look, and held out his hand to her. "Never mind the rest of the world, Phyllis," he said, very gravely. "Let them say what they like, dear. If we want each other, there is no power on earth that can divide us."

She drew in her breath sharply as she laid her hand in his.

"And now," he said, "give me your answer. Will you marry me?"

He felt her hand move convulsively in his own. She was trembling still.

He bent towards her, gently drawing her. "It is 'Yes,' Phyllis," he whispered. "It must be 'Yes.'"

And after a moment, faltering,

through white lips, she answered him. "It is—'Yes.'"

"And you accepted him! Oh, Phyllis!"

The younger sister looked at her with eyes of wide astonishment, almost of reproach. They were two of a family of ten; a country clergyman's family that had for its support something under three hundred pounds a year. Phyllis, the eldest girl, worked for her living as a private secretary, and had only lately returned home for a brief holiday.

Lord Wyverton, who had seen her once or twice in town, had actually followed her thither to pursue his courtship. She had not believed herself to be the attraction. She had persistently refused to believe him to be in earnest until that afternoon, when the unbelievable thing had actually happened and he had definitely asked her to be his wife. Even then, sitting alone with her sister in the bedroom, they shared, she could scarcely bring herself to realize what had happened to her.

"Yes," she said; "I accepted him of course—of course. My dear Molly, how could I refuse?"



"And so you won't have anything to say to me?" he said at last. "In fact you don't like me?"

Molly made no reply, but her silence was somewhat tragic.

"Think of mother," the elder girl went on, "and the children. How could I possibly refuse—even if I wanted?"

"Yes," said Molly; "I see. But I quite thought you were in love with Jim Freeman."

In the silence that followed this blunt speech she turned to look searchingly at her sister. Molly was just twenty, and she did the entire work of the household with sturdy goodwill.

She possessed beauty and was unusual. They were a good-looking family, and she was the fairest of them all. Her eyes were dark and very shrewd, under their straight black brows; her face was delicate in coloring and outline; her hair was red-gold and abundant.

Moreover, she was clever in a strictly practical sense. She enjoyed life in spite of straitened circumstances. And she possessed a serenity of temperament that no amount of adversity ever seemed to ruffle.

Having obtained the desired glimpse of her sister's face, she returned without comment to the very worn stocking that she was repairing.

"I had a talk with Jim Freeman the other day," she said. "He was driving the old doctor's dog-cart and going to see a patient. He offered me a lift."

"Oh!" Phyllis's tone was carefully devoid of interest. She took up a