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Sweet Eva!

CHAPTER XXIII

No doubt he would be horribly embarrassed. No doubt he would ring for the maid or something . . . She laughed feverishly at the thought.

"We must have some more dinner parties when we are settled in town," she said. "I hope you have lots of friends, Philip. I mean to be very gay."

She felt herself to be just an on-looker, watching with wide eyes of amazement, listening with astonished ears to this other girl who was Mrs. Philip Winterdik. This other girl who was striving desperately to make some sort of a thing of life out of the ruins of her dreams.

Philip did not answer, but his eyes turned involuntarily to his father's empty chair, and Eva flushed crimson. She knew what his thought must be, and she hated her new, other self who had spoken so flippantly.

"I'm getting horrid—horrid!" she thought, in despair. "What will become of me?"

She broke into the silence desperately. "There's the carpet for your smoking-room, Philip. Hadn't you better choose it yourself instead of leaving it to me? A man's taste is so different to a woman's."

He roused himself with an effort. "Oh, choose anything—can't the man at the shop tell you the right sort of thing?"

"Oh, yes, I dare say he can," she said indifferently. "I only wondered if you wouldn't prefer to choose it yourself."

"I shan't notice if there's a carpet or not," Philip said hardily.

She remembered his words the next afternoon when she was in the empty smoking-room at the flat.

Most of the "other rooms" were decorated and furnished—she had no hope that Philip would take a little interest in this one at least.

She looked round her with heavy eyes; the empty place depressed her—the rumble of the distant traffic seemed to be miles and miles away.

Eva clasped her hands together feverishly.

"And all my life will be like this—always," she thought in sudden panic.

With every day she and Philip only grew farther apart; she knew that Philip was changing even as she herself was; he was more cynical, less contented, and she was powerless to prevent it.

She wondered why he had alluded to the night of that dinner-party before their marriage.

Her cheeks burned as she remembered how on that homeward drive she had put her arms round his neck and kissed him—she covered her face with her trembling hands, and suddenly she felt the tears on her fingers.

She had been so happy then—life had been like a beautiful flower slowly

unfolding its petals before her; and now she looked round the empty rooms—empty, as her whole future must be!

Looking back to the first night of their marriage, she wondered that Philip had ever troubled to pretend that he cared for her. She remembered how nearly she had been tempted to believe in him; how for a moment at least she had trembled on the brink—she felt that she could never be thankful enough that she had finally turned a deaf ear to his entreaties.

She left the empty room and went across to the one which she had chosen for her own. The dainty silk curtains were drawn, but a ray of September sunlight filtered through and lay like a bar of gold on the carpet. It was complete now, down to the smallest detail, and only waiting for its mistress.

"If only things had been just a little, little different," she thought, wildly. She turned away, her heart bursting with bitterness and sorrow, and as she crossed the hall to the front door, which she had left half open behind her, a man pushed it wide and stepped into the hall.

"Jove, what luck! I thought I should find you here," he said, delightedly, and Eva looked up through her tears into Tom Calligan's face.

CHAPTER XXIV

There was a moment of tense silence, then Calligan took a quick step towards her.

"Philip," he said insistently, "is he—isn't he here?"

She shook her head. She could not trust herself to speak. She was brushing the tears away childishly with her knuckles. She turned away, fighting hard for her composure.

Calligan hesitated; then he followed her. He put out his hand as if to touch her, but drew it away again.

"Oh, my dear," he said agitatedly. "What is it? What is it?"

"Nothing—really nothing—nothing!"

"He dressed in his breath hard. He walked away to the open door and for a moment stood looking into the street outside.

Presently he spoke, rather mechanically.

"I heard you'd taken this flat—a man Philip knows at the club told me—so I came along. I suppose you're not settled in yet?"

"No." She had mastered herself, though her voice was a little shaky still. "It's nearly finished, though." She choked back a lump in her throat.

"I'm afraid I'm very rude—I didn't say how glad I was to see you."

He looked at her and quickly away again.

"I've thought of you—often," he said in an odd jerky voice.

"I've thought about you, too," Eva said, trying to smile. "It was horrid after you left."

"Was it?" He found it impossible to be natural. "I'm glad you're coming

to town," he added, with an effort. "The Highway House won't be too cheerful this winter."

"No—and Mrs. Winterdik has gone away now, you know."

"Has she—and—Philip?"

"Oh, Philip's very busy; he has had his father's affairs to see to."

"Yes."

There was an awkward silence.

There was a puzzled pucker on the girl's forehead. She was vaguely conscious of the contrast between herself and this man, but could not understand or account for it.

She had spoken the truth when she said she was glad to see him. She was only ashamed that he should have seen her tears and distress.

"I'm a bad hostess," she said with an effort. "I ought to ask you in—but I was just going, and so . . ."

"I'll come with you," he interposed hurriedly. He did not want to see the flat, and he was afraid to trust himself alone with her. He had known when he left the Highway House that Eva had been the great attraction for him there, he had not guessed till to-day how strong his love for her had grown.

"We'll go and get some tea, shall we?" he said again. "I've nothing to do. Are you going back to Apsley to-night?"

"Oh, yes—I've had to come up a great deal lately to see to furniture and things."

They were outside now, and Calligan shut the door of the flat behind them with a little slam.

They set off together down the road.

There was nothing much in Calligan. He had no especial good looks to recommend him; he was just an ordinary cheerful, kind-hearted young man. But before he and Eva had reached the teshop he had made her feel happier than she had done since he said good-bye to her down at Apsley.

When they were facing one another across the round table, Eva said frankly:

"I don't know what it is about you, but you always make me feel very pleased with myself, Mr. Calligan."

"Do!" He coloured to the roots of his hair. "It's kind of you to say so . . ."

"Jove! what rum looking cakes."

The cakes were quite ordinary, but Calligan felt that he must change the subject at any cost. He did not want to talk about himself or about Eva.

Deep down in his heart, he knew that he was beginning to hate Philip Winterdik, but for the moment he wanted to put the knowledge aside.

"What have you been doing since I saw you?" Eva asked him. "It seems so long ago . . ."

He laughed, not very naturally.

"I haven't done anything worth talking about. I've been to the club most evenings—once or twice to a theatre. I'm a lousy beggar, you know."

"Are you? Then I suppose I must be, too, because I don't seem to have done anything either. I can't even interfere with the household arrangements as I used to at home. I just wander about—go for walks—"

"And play tennis," he interrupted, smiling.

She shook her head.

"I've never played since I was married." There was a note of wonderment in her voice.

"You'll find the time pass more quickly when you're up in town," he told her. "We shall have to do some theatres. Do you like theatres?"

"Oh, yes . . ."

"Good. Well, I'll take you. I—"

He broke off. He had not intended to say this.

"Philip will have to take you to all the shows," he added, lamely.

Philip! Her husband's name gave Eva a faint shock. She had almost forgotten him during the last few minutes.

"I hope you'll come and see us often," she said, with a touch of anxiety in her voice. "I mean to keep open house. I tell Philip that I mean to be so gay—so gay . . ."

"I stopped, the contrast between the words she was uttering and the black devastation in her heart striking her with bitter force.

His eyes met hers gravely across the table.

"I shall be delighted," he said formally.

"You won't find Philip has altered in the least," she rushed on. "He isn't a bit the stay-at-home, settle-down sort of married man. We're quite a sensible couple—he goes his way and I go mine. It's such an excellent way to arrange things, don't you think?" she asked defiantly.

"Excellent," said Calligan with an effort.

He had kept his eyes downcast, but now he raised them, and for a moment they met Eva's.

It was only a moment, but long enough for him to read the whole tragedy in her bravely smiling face. She would die rather than tell him, he knew, that her marriage with Philip Winterdik had been a mistake—a terrible mistake, without remedy.

He looked away from her with a sick feeling of helplessness.

"I'm quite ready, if you are," she was saying composedly.

"How many cakes have we had? Three each! Oh, how greedy!"

(To be continued.)

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