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Sweet Eva!

CHAPTER VII.
 "There isn't anybody," said his son. The old man gave a gasp of relief and held out his hand.

"Then it's all right—it's all right, isn't it—eh?"
 "Quite all right," said Philip. He gripped his father's hand, then let it go, and walked out of the room.

Kitty was not at all loving; in fact heart quivered as he planted that fact firmly in his brain, but he took a hard grip of himself instantly. She was not worth loving—he had done with her.

He deliberately thought of Eva Dennison. She had treated him fairly and squarely ever since he first met her; he was glad now to remember her frankness with him the night when he found her looking at the moon.

She did not care for him, of course—he had no right to expect it when he did not care for her—but at least they would get on well together; in a vague sort of way it seemed to him that life with her would evolve itself into a sort of eternal tennis match in which she would capably partner him.

Anyhow, he meant to ask her to marry him. She might refuse, of course—for the smallest fraction of a second he hoped that she would—but he sternly brought himself to book again.

There would be married at once. There was nothing to wait for. He would let Kitty see that he . . . He pulled himself together sharply. Kitty. And yet . . . yet . . . those moments in the Dennisons' rose-garden had been very sweet; in a bruised imagination he could still feel the soft touch of her lips on his.

He wandered about the house and grounds all the morning. He deliberately tried to imagine how he would feel if he knew that to-morrow, or the next day, or the day after that, he had got to walk out of it and never return; how he would feel if he saw someone else living there. He knew he would feel pretty sick.

He tried to picture himself trying to make an income for himself, perhaps chained to an office stool all day and coming home cross and tired every night of his life to a suburban home. It was not in the least probable that he would ever do such a thing—he was the kind of man to clear off abroad first and rough it there—but it helped somehow to conjure these pathetic pictures of what might happen to him if Eva Dennison refused to marry him.

He thought of his father and mother, left to eke out the rest of their lives on a small and insufficient income; of his mother with perhaps only one servant to help her; and to his inexperience that seemed a terrible thing. How could one possibly be even moderately happy without luxury and the thousand and one things to which she had been accustomed all her life?

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been accustomed all her life? He knew now what a fool he had been to imagine that a girl like Kitty would ever consent to marry him with such a prospect in store for her.

The Arringtons were poor, but only with comparative poverty, and the whole family threw every effort they possessed into the somewhat doubtful task of "keeping up appearances."

They might not pay their bills regularly, but they kept two or three smart maids; there might be whispers of moneylenders and other unpleasantnesses, but Kitty was always one of the best-dressed women wherever she went.

So Philip Winterdick argued with himself for the whole morning. He remembered grimly how once, during his "Varsity days, he had stayed up all night with a friend, trying to dissuade him from marriage with a rich widow ten years his senior, but a woman whose fat money-bags would have helped that friend out of a horribly tight corner.

"You'll regret it for the rest of your life if you do it, old man," Philip had said over and over again. "Some day the right woman will come along, and then . . ."

Oh, he had been very eloquent! He smiled grimly now, remembering how at last he had gained his point. Fielding had not married the rich widow, and he had faced the music like a man, been sent down and had cleared off abroad.

Philip had heard from him only a week ago, telling him that the farm was paying at last, and that the best girl in the world had turned up and was going to put a shoulder to the wheel along with him. "And it's you I have to thank for it," so he wrote in happy eloquence. "Supposing I'd made a fool of myself five years ago . . ."

Young Winterdick wondered if he stood now in a similar position to that once occupied by Fielding.

Eva was not a rich widow ten years his senior, certainly; she was a young girl and a charming one, so no doubt many men would say—but he did not love her, and did not want to marry her, and that was all there was to it.

On the other hand, there were his mother and father to be considered; they had been so thundering good to him, and he was their only son . . .

And it wasn't as if Kitty cared! He drew a long breath. If she had, he would have risked everything and stalked out of the Highway House with his head in the air, a happy beggar; but as it was . . . Young Winterdick walked home to lunch.

"I'll ask her if she'll have me," he told himself. "I'll go over to-day and ask her if she'll have me . . ."

But it was nearly five o'clock in the afternoon before he could screw up his courage sufficiently to go to the Dennisons', and ever then he walked the whole way instead of taking the car.

There was no desperate hurry. He had got all the rest of his life to spend with her, so half an hour or so could make no difference.

In the drive he met Peter, who passed him hurriedly with a rather self-conscious nod.

"Bonnie's in the garden with the boys," he said. "Go round, will you? They're picking plums, I believe."

Philip walked on slowly; he knew quite well where Peter was going, and he could not quite control the spasm of jealousy in his heart. So many times he had made his way to Kitty with just the same joyous anticipation.

One of the younger Dennison boys overtook him as he crossed the lawn. "Bonnie's up in the tree picking the plums," he said. "She's going to make jam. Mother's wild, because she says the cook ought to do it, but Bonnie won't let her. She always made it before we came here, you know."

"Did she?" A ghost of a smile crept into Philip's eyes; he liked Eva for her conservative determination. "Why do you call her Bonnie?" he asked.

The boy laughed. "Don't know . . . we always have . . . there she is, look!"

They had reached the fruit garden now, and Philip saw a ladder planted against the trunk of one of the largest trees; saw, too, a pair of feet on the top rung and heard voices somewhere up above in the laden branches.

He went forward a step. "Can I be of any assistance?" he asked.

There was a little laugh of consternation, then the dainty feet came down a couple of rungs and Eva peered at him from amongst the leaves.

"You! And I'm not fit to be seen. Look out, I'll come down."

She scrambled down quickly, jumping the last couple of feet, and landed beside Philip.

Her face was flushed and her hair disordered; the sleeves of her cotton frock were rolled up to the elbow and her hands were stained with the bark of the branches.

"We're gathering plums," she said. "I'm going to make jam."

There was a note of defiance in her voice, though she laughed. "I suppose he's thinking what a sight I look," she thought helplessly.

"Well, I suppose I can help, can't I?" he said. "Or does it take brains to pick plums?"

He took off his coat as he spoke and went up the ladder. He discovered the younger Dennison boy up amongst the branches.

"Want any help?" he asked cheerily. "He was beginning to enjoy himself; it was a long time since he had done anything like this. He picked away manfully till the tree was almost empty."

"I think you might come down now, you two," Eva said presently from the ground below. Philip Winterdick dropped out of the tree and landed beside her. He was rather grimy and there were bits of leaves sticking in his hair. He phased a self-conscious hand over it.

"We're a pair now, any way," he said whimsically. The girl flushed a little; she was looking very happy and her eyes shone.

"I am sure you didn't come up with the intention of doing this," she said laughing.

He sobered suddenly. "No," he said; "I didn't." He paused looking away from her across the lawn where the setting sun was casting long shadows.

"I wonder if you will spare me a moment, so that I can tell you why I did come?" he said.

She looked at him in puzzled silence, and suddenly Philip found himself longing to tell her the truth; to do the square thing by her as he was sure she would have done it by him; to tell her about Kitty, and his father's proposal, and about Mr. Dennison's conditions, and almost before he was aware of it he had blurted out that he was in trouble—rotten trouble—that he felt he must tell someone, and might he tell her?

"Why, of course," she said. "If there is anything I can do to help you . . ."

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