

ALL FOR LOVE.

CHAPTER XV. PHILIP'S AOWAL.

All at once the lines in Philip's fine face began to stiffen, his firm chin settled aggressively, and his eyes glowed with the fire of battle that was habitual to him when he found himself on the verge of dealing with any critical problem.

He waited patiently, until she paused to draw breath in the midst of a vivacious description, when he arrested her with a gesture, and, looking straight into her eyes, he said resolutely yet gently: "My Lady Beth, it won't do. You and I are keeping up a game at cross-purposes. You know, as well as I, that we can never feel at ease with each other, can never settle down to anything like real friendliness, until we have freely discussed a certain subject, and had it out with each other. I mean Miss Crawford's will and plans for us, and that is just what I am here for now. It was my only chance, for you know I have not been able to get a word alone with you during the last week. It is true you wrote me frankly on the subject, asking me to release you from the long-contemplated union, assuming that the idea of it was as repulsive to me as it is to yourself, and—

"Of course," Beth here interposed, her cheeks like scarlet geraniums. "Could it be anything but repulsive—that scheme to coerce two people to marry each other just to secure a fortune?"

"That part of it I grant," gravely replied Philip, "is a repulsive scheme. I think it was almost a criminal thing to do; for there are men and women in the world who would agree to it just for the sake of the money, without regard to compatibility of temperament or any other conscientious consideration, and be miserable ever after. With that view of it, I immediately signified my willingness to do as you suggested reserving, however, the privilege of discussing the subject further with you. But as I thought more of the matter, especially after Teddy opened my eyes to certain things, and I found you had evaded my visit by going to York Harbor, I began to think there must also be a personal repulsion on your part, so deeply settled that you could not even tolerate meeting me. Tell me, Lady Beth, am I personally repulsive to you?" he concluded in a tone that trembled in spite of his manhood.

Beth's nether lip was fiercely gripped between her small white teeth. This sudden turn in their conversation had taken her wholly by

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surprise, and nearly deprived her of her poise. Philip personally repulsive to her! Oh, if he had even a suspicion of the truth, where should she go to hide her mortification?

Then her quivering soul sprang to arms. He had no right to probe her, thus, and her only refuge against breaking down utterly before him lay in sharply turning the tables upon himself. She sat erect and raised a pair of blazing eyes to him.

"Can you ask me that?" she demanded, and then could have shrieked with agony at what she had done. He went white to the lips; yet he did not flinch a hair. Looking straight back at her, he quietly replied:

"I understand, and I see it was in your presumptuous question. Still, you have been so kind to me during our visit to Ted, that, with the assurance of your forgiveness, I began to hope you would eventually forget the rash speech. But I see it still rankles in your heart, and I cannot blame you, either."

"He paused, but Beth remained silent. She knew if she attempted to speak she would burst into violent weeping, and shamelessly betray her secret then and there. "I cannot blame you," he presently repeated in the same quiet, repressed tone. "It was a dreadful thing to say, no matter what the provocation, but surely, Beth, you do not believe that I deliberately gave expression to an actually existent state of thought or sentiment. You cannot believe that I was so disloyal, so hypocritical toward the child of whom I was really very fond in those old days. See here," he interposed, with a slight start, as he drew a wallet from his coat and began to search its pockets. "You would not write to me; you would not even send a message; through others; you would not allow me to have a likeness of yourself during all these years, so I have had to content myself with this one, poor little memento of the past."

He had found a yellow, time-worn envelope, from which he slipped a small photograph, and showed it to her. It was a picture that had been taken of her only a few months before he went away. It showed a child of about twelve years in a short dress, her hair drawn straight back from her forehead, and woven into a massive braid that hung over one shoulder. The face was plain, the features irregular, the nose a decided pug, the brow and upper part of the head being too large in proportion to the lower part of the face; the figure undeveloped, the pose stiff and awkward; and, judged by a disinterested person, or at that moment by Beth's sensitive, lacerated pride, it was the likeness of a very unattractive child that seemed to mock her with fresh with cruel memories of that never-to-be-forgotten experience amidst the dense foliage of the old beech. Every nerve in her body prickled as from the shock of an

electric battery at the sight, goading her to renewed indignation against, and unjust misinterpretation of, the man sitting beside her.

"So you preserved that as a reminder," she said, with curling lips; then would have snatched the picture from him to reduce it to atoms, and so annihilate forever this last souvenir of that "freckle-faced fright" of long ago.

But he was too quick for her. He arrested her hands, captured and slipped the picture back into its envelope and out of sight, thus preserving it from destruction.

"How you misjudge me," he said, reproachfully; "but, let me tell you, I have kept that picture—and always shall keep it—because I had and could get no other, and—his voice suddenly softening—"because I loved that little girl not for her beauty, as you have just seen, but for her moral worth, her unimpeachable loyalty to her friends, and to principle, young as she was. She had her faults—oh, yes—a temper that could cut and slash at times, for one thing; but from the day she became My Lady Beth to the boy who meddled with her doll, she never really swerved from her allegiance to her. Now have I provided to you that I never felt any personal repulsion for you, in spite of that one cruel bit of evidence against me?"

He concluded with an earnestness that thrilled Beth with secret rapture. He had turned away from him, and was again looking out of the window; or his assertion that he had loved that little girl had evidently made her shy and afraid to meet his glance.

lest he should suspect the truth. "Do you believe me, Lady Beth?" he questioned appealingly, as she did not respond to his previous question? "Will you prove it?" she asked, her eyes still fastened upon the flittering andscape outside.

"I should be more than glad to do so. How can I?" he eagerly inquired.

"Will you give me that picture? It's hideous." His face fell. "No," he said gravely, after a moment's thought. "As I told you, I shall keep it always. I am sorry, though, if that is the only convincing proof I can give you of my loyalty."

"Beth's heart bounded within her. She could almost have shouted with joy at his refusal. The very fact that he would not part with the hideous picture at any cost was better proof to her than he had ever experienced personal repulsion for her than any he could have offered or she demanded. She suddenly turned a bright face to him, which rather belied her deprecatory tone as she said:

"How childish you must think me, and I have broken our compact to suit the past behind us. I have no reason to doubt your word, Philip, and I promise I will be guilty of no more unpleasant reminders in the future. Now tell me—"

"Yes, there is one thing more I want to tell you just here," Philip hastily interposed as he realized she was about to switch him off upon some subject that was wholly foreign to what they had been talking of. "It may seem premature and even more presumptuous than what I have already said. I told you I loved that little girl as a boy loves a loyal friend, but during the week we have spent together I have learned to love

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you, Beth, as a man loves the woman whom he wishes to make his wife. Can you believe me, dear? It has come to me suddenly, this awakening, but it is none the less true, none the less absorbing. Will you let me try to win you, My Lady Beth?"

But Beth suddenly froze again at this amazing avowal, her proud and sensitive heart taking instant alarm as the thought suggested itself that, possibly, Aunt Eliza's fortune might hold some temptation for him, after all, and she never, never would marry him for that money.

"No—no—we have settled all that, Philip. It is not to be thought of," she faltered tremulously.

He scanned the flushed, downcast face earnestly. Could she have seen his eyes he must have won. "Beth—I love you," he pleaded. "Have you nothing to give me in return?" "Please—please drop it," she said, with a queer catch in her breath. "It is impossible!" "Impossible!" he repeated, with a sudden tightening of his lips. "I will not believe that—yet! But Beth had taken refuge once more at the window and was mute, and the disappointed suitor was also obliged to hold his peace.

Presently he excused himself and went into the smoker, and Beth, glad to be left alone, laid her head back upon her pillow, closed her eyes, and reveled in those blessed words: "I love you now as a man loves the woman whom he wishes to make his wife."

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