

THE SUNDAY BEE

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FIVE CENTS

EILEEN - - - by W. L. George

"It Surely Would Spoil Her," Said Mrs. Delabole. "You Wouldn't Put a Bunch of Daisies Into a Gold Vase, Would You?"



LUNCH was ending at Rose Cottage. The heat of this summer afternoon, the heavy scent of flowering hay, laid upon Peter Walford a pleasant languor. He had eaten enough. He watched the course of a bee, which had entered the dining room and now widely circled, distracted and uncomprehending, mysteriously confined by the walls. Mr. and Mrs. Delabole, his hosts, were silent, as if they respected the hush. Or perhaps they had come to a time of life where peace yields joys that earlier years obtain from activity. They were old, both of them, he just 70, his wife a year or two younger; they sat now, neat and cool, with their thin faces the color of fossil ivory, soft eyed, delicate handed, old people of lace.

"Do you know," said Walford, suddenly turning to Mrs. Delabole, "I love being here?"

"We love to have you, Peter," said the old lady, smiling. A blush of pleasure rose for a moment into her cheeks, that were like the crumpled petal of a faded tea rose.

"I love being here," repeated Walford. "In town there's hurry, noise, assertion. But all the time one wonders whether one makes a noise to convince oneself that one's alive. Here, in the country, one doesn't need to assert. Life is real. Slowly the cattle go by to feed, heads lowered to the grass in the ditches. The day passes; night falls; slowly the cattle come home. Mrs. Delabole, you endure forever in a world without change."

"Without change," cried the old lady petulantly. "I don't say that Burleigh Abbas is a giddy village. But things do happen. There's—well, lots of things happen."

"For instance?" asked Walford, maliciously, as he split a peach.

"Why, Peter, you haven't noticed; we've got a new maid." The two men laughed together, and Mrs. Delabole looked offended.

"Don't be cross, Chloe," said her husband. "I know she's a pet, but—"

"She is a pet," said Mrs. Delabole, firmly. "Do you mean to say that you haven't noticed her, Peter? She's so pretty, and only 16. She's been with us two months now, and it's as if she was the little girl I never had. She's like a brown thrush fallen from the nest, all soft and shy, with the dearest eyes, though one doesn't see them often because she's too shy."

"I can't help wishing they'd taught her how to black boots," said Mr. Delabole.

"Don't be brutal, Allan. Eileen's a darling."

"I know. She was not born to black, immortal bird."

"Well," said Walford. "I'm anxious to see your paragon. You know how susceptible I am to feminine charms. And I do my boots myself."

At this moment the door opened and Eileen slowly came in, carrying coffee upon a tray. Nothing was said. The girl must have been conscious of the silence, for as she went round, holding out the tray, she blushed. Walford considered her with a sort of cynical amusement. He appreciated the fact that she had made an entrance just when attention was concentrated upon her. By Jove, the old people were right. Eileen was pretty in a way that village girls aren't pretty. She had none of the color, the buxom health that makes a village belle.

As she stood by Mr. Delabole, holding out the tray, with immense awkwardness, as if its weight were enormous, he took in the details of her, the dark hair fluffed out by its fineness, and upon which, as she moved, a reddish shadow seemed to fit. The skin was not white, but almost pure waxen yellow, which imperceptibly at the cheeks changed to a healthy color. There was no movement in the features, except that the small and excessively red mouth was compressed, as if she was making an effort.

When she came to him he noticed first the amazing redness of her hands and wrists, the almost calculated awkwardness of the way in which she held the tray with both thumbs rigid and erect. But he looked up sideways, for he wanted to see her eyes; only the lashes were downcast, and made upon her cheeks two crescents of blurred shadow.

She went out, treading gently. Peter Walford grew conscious of the simplicity, the childishness of these old people. So, very lightly, as if to shock them, he said:

"She's perfectly charming. All she wants is a brown taffeta frock with short sleeves and paniers to the skirt. Trimming, I think, old gold. And for the evening, just a strip of black silk with big yellow pods, and a bright blue and yellow turban. Yes, I think I'll marry her and get her the clothes."

They both laughed at him. Mrs. Delabole said:

"Oh, that would never do. It would spoil her. You wouldn't put a bunch of daisies into a vase of gold, would you?"

The conversation changed and evaporated. Mrs. Delabole went to some household errand, while her husband retired to the place he called his study, which he used as a dormitory after lunch. Walford went out in the garden where now the afternoon heat indisposed him to movement. He stood, hands in his pockets, blinding his eyes at the glare of the south wall. He made a discordant figure in this garden, so ancient that the lavender bushes had grown stems like trees.

He was a man of middle height, fresh faced, blue eyed, short mustached; he looked sturdy and pleasant; he had a clean, brushed, comfortable air; only two shallow folds on either side of his mouth caused his lower lip to retract, gave his features individuality.

Walford was always laughing at things a little. He did no work, and did it with ironic satisfaction. He suspected the profundity of his pleasures and ignored the value of his griefs; he thought that nothing lasted, but that things were worth beginning all the same. He wrote a little, and hoped nothing of posterity; he played golf, but knew the limits of



It seemed wrong to Eileen, somehow, to sit in the drawing room except on Sunday.

his handicap. He had once said that the best sensation in the day was the first mouthful of eggs and bacon.

Next morning as he went about the house he could hear Eileen upstairs, making the beds. He couldn't go up and help her. He found himself vaguely exasperated, as he always was when some wish formed by his languid and disillusioned mind could not be satisfied.

It was 11 o'clock before he saw Eileen cross the kitchen garden and go into the kitchen. Smiling at himself, he thought, "Now's the time." So hands in pockets, Peter Walford went to the back door. It stuck, and as he wrenched at the handle and nearly fell into the kitchen, his opportunity was made, for Eileen turned around, staring, then looked away. He was irritated. He would force her to confront him. "Sorry," he said, "to burst in like this. What's the matter with this lock?"

"It sticks, sir." She was looking at him now, the red mouth a little open. And as she turned aside again, he saw, with a little thrill of semi-hostile satisfaction, a hot blush run over the girl's neck.

"Well," thought Walford, a little later, "you've seen her eyes, and how much forrader are you, my dear fellow? But, by Jove, they were pretty eyes!" A very bright brown, brown with a red light in them. Coffee colored eyes. Just for a moment they'd come up behind a black veil of lashes.

As he went along slowly, swishing with his stick at tall

clumps of nettles, he was thinking how right he'd been about brown taffeta with touches of gold. And there was a lot to be done with bright blues. By Jove, she only wanted a little arranging, and she'd make no end of a sensation. Walford stopped suddenly upon the path, stabbing at a rut. Absurd, of course. Still—it would be rather fun. He said aloud, "Why not?" The folds on either side of his mouth grew deeper. People would think he'd gone mad; they'd buzz like a hive; they'd rush round tea parties asking each other, did they know that Peter Walford, etc.? He enjoyed these ideas immensely, being one of those men who like to pay tricks on society. A trick in taffeta!

In the early afternoon Walford addressed his hosts:

"By the way, I'm going to marry Eileen."

They both stared at him, and Mr. Delabole laughed. But Mrs. Delabole had caught in Walford's quiet tone something real which disquieted her. Still she tried to be light:

"How awfully nice for you, Peter, but we've told you she can't black boots."

"For her sake," said Peter, "I will wear patent leather. You know, I'm perfectly serious. I'm going to marry Eileen."

"My dear fellow," said Mr. Delabole, "don't be absurd."

"Why are you so surprised? Don't you think she's charming? Mrs. Delabole, didn't you say she was a pet?"

"Of course," said the old lady, in an acid tone, "but I didn't mean it like that!"

"I can't help that," said Peter. "It's your who pointed her charms out to me, so it's your fault."

"Well!"

"But I'm not reproaching you, so don't reproach me. Now, I know what you're going to say; you're going to say that a Walford, whatever that may be, can't marry a girl like that just because he's been to Cambridge, and she's a gardener's daughter. Everybody'll be saying that. She'll be frightened of her servants; when people call on her she won't dare to open her mouth; when she has to do the household she'll order boiled bacon every day. Oh, it will be lovely."

Mrs. Delabole jumped up: "Don't, Peter. It's as if you disliked her. Oh, do let's talk of something else."

"We will if you like, but I'm going to marry her all the same. Oh, don't you worry. In six months she'll have pale hands, and I'll love them; she'll have her hair scragged off her forehead unless I have her bobbed. Bobbed! Yes! Manicured to the point of agony. Shoes three sizes smaller than her present ones, and a size smaller than her feet. And taffeta. Some are born for the purple. Eileen is born for taffeta."

The old people did not reply.

Without surprise, Peter Walford found himself involved in a courtship filled with cynical comedy. That day he spoke twice to Eileen. The first time she answered, "I don't know, sir." The second time, when he commented upon the heat, she flung him a shy glance, blushed and almost ran away. "It's like hunting a fawn," he thought. She did not understand. She thought him a nice, civil gentleman. If only he wouldn't look at her like that.

As that evening she sat down in her room with a worn copy of "The Woman Thou Gavest Me," she felt unaccountably worried. She could not understand that she was disturbed by the purposefulness of Walford's gaze; she knew only that she felt very young and small, and that she wanted to talk to her mother. Only it wasn't her evening out. She cried a little as she went to bed, and immediately after went to sleep, being a healthy young animal in whom the body soon prevailed over the spirit.

It was not until next day that Walford aroused in her more precise emotions; in the afternoon he had the audacity to enter the kitchen, where Eileen was alone, peeling apples. He leant against the dresser and said, "You'll have no apples left if you take the peel off so thick."

She did not reply. Her heart was beating with fear, like that of a wounded bird in a man's hand. No wonder she was slicing the peel so thickly.

"Let me show you," said Walford. With slow, deliberate movements, he picked up an apple and took the knife from the little red hand that first stiffened, and suddenly relaxed as his fingers brushed hers. He peeled the apple perfectly, and held it out for her, expecting her to smile. "Well," he said, "what do you think of that?" A sunbeam powdered with dust was falling upon her hair, making it golden.

"It's very nice, sir," she replied, in little more than a whisper. She was very frightened. He pleased her, this easy mannered man with the queer smile, though she had an idea he was making a fool of her. But he disquieted her all the same, and she liked him, but she did wish he'd go away. Suppose Mrs. Delabole came in! What would she say?

Three days later events took their definition. Walford had found out in conversation that Friday was Eileen's evening out. She had a great deal to say to her mother, and she did not know whether she would dare say it. It seemed so silly. After all, he hadn't said or done anything. Only . . . She was wearing a green coat and skirt that had belonged to Mrs. Delabole. It was the worst possible shade she could wear. She had enhanced the effect with a black straw hat garlanded with a large number of roses, one of which hung on a broken wire and swung from the back of the brim. Her little hands on the horn handle of an umbrella glowed purple! She'd tell Mrs. Stone. She felt excited and reassured! She'd know. But what would she say? Then just as she jumped over a stile she stopped, for a figure in brown rose from the shelter of the hedge and came towards her.

"Hullo!" said Walford. "May I go with you a little way?" She stared at him, and her gaze was so strained that her eyelids took on a new shape. "What's the matter?" he said. "You aren't frightened, are you?"

"No, sir."

"Well, then! Where are you going to?"

"I'm going to see my mother, sir."

"Where does she live? In Burleigh Abbas?"

"Just the other side, sir," whispered Eileen.

"All right. I'll go along with you and keep the tramps off." She did not reply, and they walked side by side. She went faster than before.

"Why are you hurrying?" asked Walford. "You've lots of time before you. One might think you were going to your young man instead of to your mother. Haven't you got a young man?" She did not reply. "Don't be shy. I'm sure you haven't—even though you may have one soon." Still she said nothing, but when they reached the