# A Matter of Heredity

## By Gordon A. Couper

"AND you mean to say you think you can possibly foretell what any man will become—ultimately?" he said, with a curious earnestness, quite unlike his usual tactful way of falling into her moods.

"We know what we are," she began idly, and stopped. It was not worth the effort to continue.

"One's surroundings and perhaps heredity fighting it out. Who knows which will win?"

"Surroundings, if one could always live in Devonshire," was her answer. "You couldn't be wicked with that fairyland of purple coastline before you; or sorrowful, with the possibility of a mermaid or some other sea-beauty popping up in that cave over there—could you?"

"Oh, yes, all these things," he retorted coolly. "I'm not romantic like you."

She was a trifle nettled, and answered, twisting her ring: "Haven't we had enough philosophy for one day?"

"Does it bore you?"

"Rather. My mind is not large enough to be interested in such matters unless they happen to have a personal application."

"I should have called this rather personal, but perhaps you have had no hereditary weakness to conquer—only graces to develop. Well—to change the subject—that's a pretty ring: looks like an engagement ring."

"It is," said she, calmly. And there was a silence.

"You haven't worn it before—since I came—have you?"

"I cut my finger," she explained, "and it was very painful at first: and then—I forgot." She ended tamely and in some confusion.

"Then how could I be expected to know?" he demanded.

She turned and looked at him steadily: at the dark regular face, with its strong lines and angles; at the deep blue eyes now rather clouded, but ready for a sudden impulse of mirth; at the comical uplifting of one eyebrow above the other: at the one-sided smile, half-amused, half-satirical, on the somewhat changeable mouth. Then she made up her mind and said deliberately:

"I don't see that it makes an atom of difference whether you know or not."

"Nor do I," he granted. "Only you took the trouble to tell me by wearing your ring again."

She looked away, hot and uncomfortable.

"I wonder why it is I like you so much?" he continued presently, with a change of tone.

"So do I," she answered lightly—"that is, if you really do."

"Well, I do," he said simply and added: "It isn't because you are pretty, you know; I've seen scores of prettier women."

"Thank you," she bent her head in mute response.

"You must know that is true—unless you are vain, and I didn't think that of you. Am I mistaken?"

"Perhaps it is because of my cleverness?" she suggested somewhat bitterly.

"No; nor yet because you dress well; nor for your pretty ways; nor for your quaintness. You are delicate and womanly, and as sweet as—as well as my ideal woman should be; as sweet as my idea pictured her to be. I think, Sybil," said he, "I love you for your sweet nature and—and your honesty."

So here was the love-making; and after all she did not like it.

"I'm not Sybil to you," she corrected him gently.

"Did I call you Sybil? I am very forgetful. But it doesn't matter," he concluded, as if to himself.

"Doesn't it!" she retorted, with a quiet smile. "There is another who would hardly agree with you."

"Another! Oh! I see—the other fellow."

"My sister will be wanting to go back. It's nearly tea-time," she suggested, as he did not seem disposed to break the silence.

"She went ten minutes ago," he answered; "I heard the swish of her skirt. I think she wanted us to join her."

"By all means," said the girl, and rose quickly. Not one word did they speak as he helped her up the steep, winding path. When they reached the long, dusky road, she cleverly steered the conversation toward safe topics, with no encouragement from him except a single monosyllable now and then. But when they stood at the gate of the house where she and her sister lodged he seemed suddenly to rouse himself.

"I'm sorry," he said, as he opened the wicket for her. "I have made a fool of myself this afternoon."

"Yes, I think you have," she admitted sweetly.

"I don't exactly know how to undo it."

"There's no way," she interrupted quickly. "Such things are never undone; they are forgiven often; forgotten occasionally."

There was a curious note in her voice that caused him to lean forward to see her face, but she kept it turned away.

"I must go," he began; but she looked at him, dumb and wide-eyed, with some emotion, that made him ask hurriedly: "What is it? Tell me! What is wrong?"

"You said I was honest," she almost whispered: "and—and I must be—now. I don't know what you have done—you have—you have caught my soul away from me."

He stepped back, suddenly, white and troubled.

"You have—I don't know how it could happen—in a few weeks—but my will is no longer mine."

Her steady look dropped, and she suddenly turned away; and still he waited as though stunned.

"You mean you love me?" he asked, presently.

"I don't know," she answered, dully. "I don't know what love is. I thought I loved him—I mean the other fellow—at least I told him so. But perhaps there are different kinds of love—for other people. I don't know. Tell me what to——"

She stopped, and held out her hands appealingly, but before he could take them slipped her ring into her pocket.

"I must be free," she said, simply.

Then he took her hands, but almost coldly; and she, looking up into his face, was frightened, and asked, "Are you ill?"

"No," he answered, smiling a little, but with beads of perspiration on his forehead; "only tempted."

"You mean—that I—I—am mistaken?"

And then he was holding her close, his face against her brow, as he said hurriedly, "It is all wrong, Sybil. I am sinning against you—now—this moment; for even if you were free, I am not."

She closed her eyes as though in pain.

"You are married, then?"

"Oh, no!" with a startled raising of the head.

"Engaged, then?"

"Not at all."

"How, then, not free?"

"I can't tell you."

"But why?" She tried to draw away, but he held her fast.

"I cannot. I'm a coward."

She stood above him now, with one hand resting on his shoulder, the other putting back her dishevelled hair.

"I can't—quite—see," she said presently.

"There are some things a man cannot help."

"And there are some things a woman cannot fathom," she said, quietly. "You made me think that you cared——"

"And so I do, but I did not mean you to know."

"Yet, when I—let you know—you put me aside—without any reason——"

"Yes," he replied, quietly, "it is wrong, but I cannot do otherwise—at present."

"Will you tell me some day?"

"Well, if I can, yes. My father and my grandfather died from—well, from what I shall die of."

"Is it something that you can't help?" she pleaded, timidly. "I might help you, and would forgive much."

He was silent for some minutes. Then, rising, stretched out his hand in farewell. "No," he said, "you cannot fight against heredity, and, besides, there's him—the other fellow to consider. Good-bye."

She took his hand for a moment, and then quietly went towards the house, leaving him absently gazing at her retreating form.

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He had been sitting there, how long he did not know, when he was aroused by a footfall behind him, and, turning round, saw her walking slowly towards him.

She came up to him and stopped short.

"I only wanted—to say that I—understand you better now than I did yesterday."

"What? Since yesterday?"

"Yes, I understand your trouble now."

"And have discovered, no doubt, that I was right in not allowing you to make the sacrifice you would like to have made?"

"No, that's the point," she said, smiling a little. "You are quite wrong. I came to tell you so."

"You think I'm wrong?"

"Yes."

"You are very foolish!"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"You see, we expect him to-day, and I thought, perhaps—oh, why won't you help me?"

"Help you I will," said he suddenly. "You are a mere baby in these matters. I must help you from yourself, Sybil."

"I am quite sure you are not to blame," she said, earnestly.

"But I am not sure," he replied, looking at her closely.

"Could I not help?" she began, piteously.

"How many good women," he began, but turned his sentence differently, "help the devil?" he ended, in a hopeless tone. "It has gone too far."

"How long?" she asked.

"Some three generations, I know, and probably much longer. And I'm the last of the family." He changed his tone. "I return to town to-morrow," he said.

"I shall tell him—the other—as soon as I see him," she said, ignoring his remark.

"No," he interrupted, eagerly. "Wait—wait a fortnight after I have gone." Reading the protest in her face, he continued: "Take my judgment, and be quite sure first. Would you have me curse myself?"

A figure in grey flannels was seen in the distance, evidently walking to where they sat.

"You must tell me something else—quick—it is my right to know—quick, before he comes, tell me now——"

He kept his face resolutely from her and said: "You know most, or have guessed most of it; but you cannot possibly realise, of course, what it is to have one's whole body cry out for stimulant—weeks at a time. I make no excuses, but you must understand that the case is hopeless. In my young days I made a better fight; but it was bound to be a losing game in the end; one individual against—how many?" He turned and smiled at her for a moment. "I saw it was a losing fight, and I made the best of it, perhaps; only I vowed never to love any woman, and I have broken that vow. I am talking too long. This last time, though—I am ashamed and sorry for this last time—"

"It was because you were unhappy," she said, softly.

"Don't excuse it," was the curt answer.

He took out of his pocket his silver-mounted leather flask, looked at it for a second, and, with a sudden movement, hurled it over the face of the cliff; then turned to her, his face a deep red.

"I trust you don't think I'm guilty of excess often?"

She apparently did not hear, for she said:

"Since you will not have me on any other terms, will you take me with you—over the cliff—like the flask?"

He was silent for some time, then, rousing himself as from a dream, he said, quietly, "If I do not it is from love of you; if you will believe—the temptation—" again he paused, then continued, "You can be strong, and you will be happy, and I shall do what I can."

She rose to her feet, gathered her courage together, and said, clearly: "Whatever happens, you are and I am; and I'm glad——" Her voice failed her.

He smiled into her tearful eyes. "Now you are your real self; you're Sybil."

She gathered up her skirts and fairly ran to the top of the hill; when there she paused and waved a hand to him, and he was alone.

How long he sat there he never knew. He was roused by a soft rustle in the grass, and turned with his heart beating wildly, but it was not Sybil.

It was a strange dog, a poor, mangy cur that came up and nosed him, and finally taking courage, thrust his head under the mans arms for comfort. The man's hand almost mechanically fell to rubbing the forlorn head and thereupon he came to himself with a jerk. He leaned out over the cliff and looked down upon the waves dashing over the boulders below, then addressed the friendly beast with a laugh. "Melodramatic instinct, old chap, that's what it was made me hurl the flask down below; only have to get another to-morrow. To-morrow? Not quite so soon, if we can help it, eh? Come along home now, and you shall share a bone with me; and we'll call you 'Comfort' comfort has a pretty bad time, like you and me. And when our troubles master us, as they are bound to do, you lop-eared, blear-eyed creature, why, we'll just drink their health; there's nothing else for us to do, eh? To my ancestors!" He raised his hand in an imaginary toast, then he walked slowly back, and the dog followed him.

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When an editor has printed an untrue story, he should be willing to retract it. Some editors, though—benighted, stupid fellows—will print no denials unless the truths they have uttered have been libellous. If they have not been libellous, the editors refuse to make denial. They pretend to believe that their stories have been true, after all.

They are as pigheaded as the Taranaki editor who issued an obituary of the leading citizen of his town. When the leading citizen called at the office the next morning and requested that the report of his death be denied, the editor refused to accommodate him.

"We are never wrong here," he said, in a lordly way. "We never print denials or retractions in our sheet."

But the leading citizen protested and protested, and finally the editor said:

"No use talking, sir; we can't deny your death. The best we can do for you is to put you in to-morrow's list of births."

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