

# A Marital Advisory Board

By ELLIOT WALKER

WITH a cool boldness, the fresh, west wind kissed her cheeks until they glowed like roses burning in a noon sunshine, intensifying the blue of her eyes, as they rested on Seaward's eager face in a long, appealing, happy yet rebuking gaze.

For his lips had touched her brow, as he lifted her across the log barring the shady meadow path; his fingers had knitted on the fair stray curl tossed to him by the breeze for its replacement under the rebellious shade hat, every fiber of her delicate being had tingled with a bewildering sense of sudden, sweet awaking, and her hand still lay in his, fluttering in its detention.

They had no right. She knew it; he knew it. Oh! they must not forget the others.

Her head drooped slowly, her foot working nervously among the grasses, to quiver against a cluster of gentians smiling to her from its nest of green.

She stooped and with her free hand plucked a blue blossom, kissed it and gave it to him.

"That is all I can give you," she said, very gently. "You will understand, I know."

"Yes." Seaward dropped her fingers with a bitter little laugh, the laugh of one from whom a prize, coveted, but beyond real hope of grasp, has vanished. "Of course, I understand."

They walked on, each silent and glancing down or away, until, passing from the low pasture land to higher ground, their steps halted on the slope, and speech came to them with the picture of shining lake and peaceful landscape.

After all, life was a practical thing. The men at their late ploughing; the boats upon the water; the cottages dotting the hillsides—all breathed of work and wealth and the every-day. Back in the fragrant, drowsy meadow it had been different.

"I suppose Weare will build beyond the Carman's," observed Seaward, pointing. "It will be a fine location, Berenice. Think of it! Next summer you will be established, with all the appurtenances thereunto belonging; everything to make you happy and the center of attraction. Let me come and see you, sometimes, won't you? Martha and Phineas can discuss real estate—they are probably doing that at this moment—and I shall take you out on the pond for the sake of old times. It seems queer to imagine us all married and settled—you and Phin, Martha and I. Well, we shan't have much to worry about then, shall we?"

"I suppose not," said the girl, absently. "Yes, it does seem strange, Harley. Certainly, you must come often. A summer will hardly be a summer without seeing something of you. I'm going to work hard on Phineas and simply make him take an interest in matters outside of business. I'll have a free rein, to be sure, but I do hate to see a woman always trotting around without her husband. People soon regard him as a mere bank account. Look at Mrs. Carman! I hope I won't be like her."

"Not for a good many years," returned Seaward, laughing naturally again. "What worries me is the dismal prospect of becoming so immersed in Martha's business affairs that I'll have mighty little chance for anything else. Still, as a man grows older, I guess those matters become all-absorbing, if only as chains of habit. I've a pretty good head for such things, and when I'm a director in all those blamed companies I'll be busy enough. Anyway, we shall have done very well for ourselves, Berenice."

"No doubt about that. Let's sit down on the grass, Harley. After this year we'll have to be dignified, and all our dear old places will know us no more. Sad thought, isn't it? I think I shall really miss you quite a bit—we've been such good, sensible friends, and have had so many pleasant hours together. You advised me about Phineas. I advised you about Martha. Dear me! We owe each other a lot, don't we?"

"I have given advice more easily, Berry."

"Have you? Why, it flowed from your lips in a perfect stream. You made it all so clear that it was my duty to myself and others. It was, of course, but I'm always doubting about this and that. You made it very plain, I'm sure. It seemed easy. I did the



She Plucked a Blue Blossom, Kissed It, and Gave It to Him

best I could with Martha. It was a trifle hard for me, in some ways."

"For example?"

"Oh! merely that I wasn't entirely sure of her being the woman exactly suited to you; but, then, she is so good-natured and with so much money—about like Phineas in my own case. I suppose I was so impressed with your common-sense views that I practically repeated them. How nicely it has all worked out!"

"Finely." Seaward, half-reclining at her feet, took the fringed gentian from his coat, toyed with it for a moment, then held it up. "Berry," he said, "no money can buy this keepsake. I shall treasure it always."

"Nonsense, Harley! I'll give you a bushel."

"Not in that way."

"Oh! that was nothing, foolish. Just a hint that you mustn't try to kiss me again, although that was nothing either—merely an impulse, an accident, perhaps. Still, as you had never done it before, I thought—that is, you startled me, and so—well, it seemed the thing to do. I mean, giving you the flower. Please don't look at me so, Harley. What possesses you today?"

"I wasn't looking at you at all, Berry. I was watching your hat lit in the wind and wondering how soon it would blow off. What were you saying? I'm not different from usual, am I? You didn't consider that brotherly peck as meaning anything, I hope. You were so near, and I never thought. As for this posy, I meant it would always remind me of that particular spot, our old log where we have so often sat, and advised, with the birds around us and the freshness and shade. I love old associations. The gentian will bring them back years from now, when you have forgotten all about me. It shall press it in some book I often pick up—'Lorna Doone,' I guess. Remember her bow?"

"I'm cold," said Berenice, shivering and clasping her hands. "Take me down to The Ledge, Harley. It's sheltered there. We shall stay until five o'clock. Don't mind me, will you? I'm awfully nervous, lately, or I shouldn't have dreamed of paying any attention to

that trifle. Put your arm under mine. This short grass is slippery."

So down the hill they went, these two hypocrites, each soul crying out for the other, each watchful brain dolefully repeating to its crying soul: "Too late! Too late!"

She leaned upon him closely, feeling the tremble of his muscles against her soft arm, sipping a last drop of comfort from her ebbing cup, with an instinctive sense of what lay behind his smiling mask. Ah! had she but had Priscilla's courage to invite her John Alden, when he brought the message of his Standish, to speak the words she thought to draw from him by indifference! Now it was too late. His kiss and her flower—poor, sweet, insulted treasures, flung in the dust of mockery, like uncared-for blossoms on the highway with the silver dew still on them!

Silently they stepped through the pine trees murmuring above them, and softly on to their retreat, a favorite nook for privacy, a great, spreading, irregular shelf of fern-hung stone, with a wooden bench facing the lake seen dimly through the trees, another a few feet away, on the west side, where one might watch the sunset.

They sat here, quiet and thoughtful for the first brief seconds, each waiting for an interesting cue to launch a conversation for the balancing of disturbed minds, their eyes upon the ground, their withdrawn arms still touching in apparent unconcern.

Suddenly a deep voice from the neighboring, unseen seat brought a quick grasp of the lingering fingers.

"Martha," it proclaimed solemnly, "I wish I were out of it. The child cares nothing for me. Very dutiful and all that, and of course I'm proud of her beauty; but she will never be happy as my wife. It won't do, Martha. Really, I'm afraid she has seen too much of Seaward, and—ahem! he of her, if you don't mind."

"Not a bit," came the placid response. "I've had my eyes open, Phineas; I do not blame them. Who could? Let us be sensible, now this

matter is before us. While we have been so occupied with these blue prints, they have rambled off day after day until now—"

"I think so! I think so, Martha! It is our fault, and may be for the best. When you advised me to propose to Berenice, I did not consider the possibility of her being unhappy."

"And I consulted you about Harley, remember. Your advice regarding his business qualifications was excellent, Phineas, but I fear he will be no more to me than a private secretary. It's all very well to have a handsome husband, but I need something more than an affectation of sentiment—a congenial, substantial companion is what I want; certainly, not a man in love with another girl."

"Right, Martha. You should release him at once."

"How?"

"Hum! That's my case with Berenice. We must throw them together; events will shape themselves. I can get a fine position for Harley. We shall see that they are fixed all right."

"We?"

"Why not, Martha? Our mutual disappointment, you know. Haw! Haw! We've blundered, my dear. I supposed, of course, when I went to you about Berenice—that—that—"

"And I never expected Phineas Weare that you would let—me—go—"

"We've blundered, I tell you. It will straighten out. Here! Don't cry about it. I can't stand that. Stop, or I'll begin right away!"

A prodigious smack followed this announcement, succeeded by an equally prodigious sigh. Then silence, save for the wind laughing in the tree tops.

The eaves-droppers, with close-pressed cheeks and entwined arms, listened for more. The girl, half hysterical, was weeping softly. The man, folding her close, kissed away her tears.

"Come!" he whispered, "let us settle it now."

Together they stepped around the rocks.

"We're caught, Martha!" exclaimed Phineas. Martha gave a shriek and pulled away.

"We heard every word!" cried Berenice, joyously. "And quite agree with you," laughed Harley.