THE PHILOSOPHER IN THE APPLE ORCHARD

ANTHONY HOPE

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It was a charmingly mild and balmy day. The sun shone beyond the orchard, and the shade was cool inside. A light breeze stirred the boughs of the old apple−tree under which the philosopher sat. None of these things did the philosopher notice, unless it might be when the wind blew about the leaves of the large volume on his knees, and he had to find his place again. Then he would exclaim against the wind, shuffle the leaves till he got the right page, and settle to his reading. The book was a treatise on ontology; it was written by another philosopher, a friend of this philosopher's; it bristled with fallacies, and this philosopher was discovering them all, and noting them on the fly−leaf at the end. He was not going to review the book (as some might have thought from his behaviour), or even to answer it in a work of his own. It was just that he found a pleasure in stripping any poor fallacy naked and crucifying it. Presently a girl in a white frock came into the orchard. She picked up an apple, bit it, and found it ripe. Holding it in her hand, she walked up to where the philosopher sat, and looked at him. He did not stir. She took a bite out of the apple, munched it, and swallowed it. The philosopher crucified a fallacy on the fly−leaf. The girl flung the apple away.

“Mr. Jerningham,” said she, “are you very busy?”

The philosopher, pencil in hand, looked up.

“No, Miss May,” said he, “not very.”

“Because I want your opinion.”

“In one moment,” said the philosopher, apologetically.

He turned back to the fly−leaf and began to nail the last fallacy a little tighter to the cross. The girl regarded him, first with amused impatience, then with a vexed frown, finally with a wistful regret. He was so very old for his age, she thought; he could not be much beyond thirty; his hair was thick and full of waves, his eyes bright and clear, his complexion not yet divested of all youth's relics.

“Now, Miss May, I'm at your service,” said the philosopher, with a lingering look at his impaled fallacy; and he closed the book, keeping it, however, on his knee.

The girl sat down just opposite to him.

“It's a very important thing I want to ask you,” she began, tugging at a tuft of grass, “and it's very—difficult, and you mustn't tell any one I asked you; at least, I'd rather you didn't.”

“I shall not speak of it; indeed, I shall probably not remember it,” said the philosopher.

“And you mustn't look at me, please, while I'm asking you.”

“I don't think I was looking at you, but if I was I beg your pardon,” said the philosopher, apologetically.

She pulled the tuft of grass right out of the ground, and flung it from her with all her force.

“Suppose a man—“ she began. “No, that's not right.”

“You can take any hypothesis you please,” observed the philosopher, “but you must verify it afterward, of course.”

“Oh, do let me go on. Suppose a girl, Mr. Jerningham—I wish you wouldn't nod.”

“It was only to show that I followed you.”

“Oh, of course you 'follow me,' as you call it. Suppose a girl had two lovers—you're nodding again—or, I ought to say, suppose there were two men who might be in love with a girl.”

“Only two?” asked the philosopher. “You see, any number of men *might be in love with*—“

“Oh, we can leave the rest out,” said Miss May, with a sudden dimple; “they don't matter.”

"Very well," said the philosopher, "if they are irrelevant we will put them aside."

"Suppose, then, that one of these men was, oh, *awfully* in love with the girl, and—and proposed, you know—"

"A moment!" said the philosopher, opening a note−book. "Let me take down his proposition. What was it?"

"Why, proposed to her—asked her to marry him," said the girl, with a stare.

"Dear me! How stupid of me! I forgot that special use of the word. Yes?"

"The girl likes him pretty well, and her people approve of him, and all that, you know."

"That simplifies the problem," said the philosopher, nodding again.

"But she's not in—in love with him, you know. She doesn't *really* care for him—*much*. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly. It is a most natural state of mind."

"Well then, suppose that there's another man —what are you writing?"

"I only put down (B)—like that," pleaded the philosopher, meekly exhibiting his note−book.

She looked at him in a sort of helpless exasperation, with just a smile somewhere in the background of it.

"Oh, you really are—" she exclaimed. "But let me go on. The other man is a friend of the girl's: he's very clever—oh, fearfully clever—and he's rather handsome. You needn't put that down."

"It is certainly not very material," admitted the philosopher, and he crossed out "handsome"; "clever" he left.

"And the girl is most awfully—she admires him tremendously; she thinks him just the greatest man that ever lived, you know. And she—she—" The girl paused.

"I'm following," said the philosopher, with pencil poised.

"She'd think it better than the whole world if —if she could be anything to him, you know."

"You mean become his wife?"

"Well, of course I do—at least, I suppose I do."

"You spoke rather vaguely, you know."

The girl cast one glance at the philosopher as she replied:

"Well, yes; I did mean become his wife."

"Yes. Well?"

"But," continued the girl, starting on another tuft of grass, "he doesn't think much about those things. He likes her. I think he likes her—"

"Well, doesn't dislike her?" suggested the philosopher. "Shall we call him indifferent?"

"I don't know. Yes, rather indifferent. I don't think he thinks about it, you know. But she—she's pretty. You needn't put that down."

"I was not about to do so," observed the philosopher.

"She thinks life with him would be just heaven; and—and she thinks she would make him awfully happy. She would—would be so proud of him, you see."

"I see. Yes?"

"And—I don't know how to put it, quite—she thinks that if he ever thought about it at all he might care for her; because he doesn't care for anybody else, and she's pretty—"

"You said that before."

"Oh dear, I dare say I did. And most men care for somebody, don't they? Some girl, I mean."

"Most men, no doubt," conceded the philosopher.

"Well then, what ought she to do? It's not a real thing, you know, Mr. Jerningham. It's in —in a novel I was reading." She said this hastily, and blushed as she spoke.

"Dear me! And it's quite an interesting case! Yes, I see. The question is, Will she act most wisely in accepting the offer of the man who loves her exceedingly, but for whom she entertains only a moderate affection—"

"Yes; just a liking. He's just a friend."

"Exactly. Or in marrying the other whom she loves ex—"

"That's not it. How can she marry him? He hasn't—he hasn't asked her, you see."

"True; I forgot. Let us assume, though, for the moment, that he has asked her. She would then have to consider which marriage would probably be productive of the greater sum total of—"

"Oh, but you needn't consider that."

"But it seems the best logical order. We can afterward make allowance for the element of uncertainty caused by—"

“Oh no; I don't want it like that. I know perfectly well which she'd do if he—the other man you know—asked her.”

“You apprehend that—”

“Never mind what I 'apprehend.' Take it as I told you.”

“Very good. A has asked her hand, B has not.”

“Yes.”

“May I take it that, but for the disturbing influence of B, A would be a satisfactory—er—candidate?”

“Ye—es; I think so.”

“She therefore enjoys a certainty of considerable happiness if she marries A?”

“Ye—es; not perfect, because of—B, you know.”

“Quite so, quite so; but still a fair amount of happiness. Is it not so?”

“I don't—well, perhaps.”

“On the other hand, if B did ask her, we are to postulate a higher degree of happiness for her?”

“Yes, please, Mr. Jerningham—much higher.”

“For both of them?”

“For her. Never mind him.”

“Very well. That again simplifies the problem. But his asking her is a contingency only?”

“Yes, that's all.”

The philosopher spread out his hands.

“My dear young lady,” he said, “it becomes a question of degree. How probable or improbable is it?”

“I don't know; not very probable—unless—”

“Well?”

“Unless he did happen to notice, you know.”

“Ah, yes; we supposed that, if he thought of it, he would probably take the desired step—at least, that he might be led to do so. Could she not—er—indicate her preference?”

“She might try—no, she couldn't do much. You see, he—he doesn't think about such things.”

“I understand precisely. And it seems to me, Miss May, that in that very fact we find our solution.”

“Do we?” she asked.

“I think so. He has evidently no natural inclination toward her—perhaps not toward marriage at all. Any feeling aroused in him would be necessarily shallow and, in a measure, artificial, and in all likelihood purely temporary. Moreover, if she took steps to arouse his attention one of two things would be likely to happen. Are you following me?”

“Yes, Mr. Jerningham.”

“Either he would be repelled by her overtures, —which you must admit is not improbable,—and then the position would be unpleasant, and even degrading, for her; or, on the other hand, he might, through a misplaced feeling of gallantry—”

“Through what?”

“Through a mistaken idea of politeness, or a mistaken view of what was kind, allow himself to be drawn into a connection for which he had no genuine liking. You agree with me that one or other of these things would be likely?”

“Yes, I suppose they would, unless he did come to care for her.”

“Ah, you return to that hypothesis. I think it's an extremely fanciful one. No, she need not marry A; but she must let B alone.”

The philosopher closed his book, took off his glasses, wiped them, replaced them, and leaned back against the trunk of the apple−tree. The girl picked a dandelion in pieces. After a long pause she asked:

“You think B's feelings wouldn't be at all likely to—to change?”

“That depends on the sort of man he is. But if he is an able man, with intellectual interests which engross him—a man who has chosen his path in life—a man to whom women's society is not a necessity—”

“He's just like that,” said the girl, and she bit the head off a daisy.

“Then,” said the philosopher, “I see not the least reason for supposing that his feelings will change.”

“And would you advise her to marry the other —A?”

“Well, on the whole, I should. A is a good fellow (I think we made A a good fellow), he is a suitable match, his love for her is true and genuine—”

“It's tremendous!”

“Yes—and—er—extreme. She likes him. There is every reason to hope that her liking will develop into a sufficiently deep and stable affection. She will get rid of her folly about B, and make A a good wife. Yes, Miss May, if I were the author of your novel I should make her marry A, and I should call that a happy ending.”

A silence followed. It was broken by the philosopher.

“Is that all you wanted my opinion about, Miss May?” he asked, with his finger between the leaves of the treatise on ontology.

“Yes, I think so. I hope I haven't bored you?”

“I've enjoyed the discussion extremely. I had no idea that novels raised points of such psychological interest. I must find time to read one.”

The girl had shifted her position till, instead of her full face, her profile was turned toward him. Looking away toward the paddock that lay brilliant in sunshine on the skirts of the apple orchard, she asked in low slow tones, twisting her hands in her lap:

“Don't you think that perhaps if B found out afterward—when she had married A, you know—that she had cared for him so very, very much, he might be a little sorry?”

“If he were a gentleman he would regret it deeply.”

“I mean—sorry on his own account; that—that he had thrown away all that, you know?”

The philosopher looked meditative.

“I think,” he pronounced, “that it is very possible he would. I can well imagine it.”

“He might never find anybody to love him like that again,” she said, gazing on the gleaming paddock.

“He probably would not,” agreed the philosopher.

“And—and most people like being loved, don't they?”

“To crave for love is an almost universal instinct, Miss May.”

“Yes, almost,” she said, with a dreary little smile. “You see, he'll get old, and—and have no one to look after him.”

“He will.”

“And no home.”

“Well, in a sense, none,” corrected the philosopher, smiling. “But really you'll frighten me. I'm a bachelor myself, you know, Miss May.”

“Yes,” she whispered, just audibly.

“And all your terrors are before me.”

“Well, unless—”

“Oh, we needn't have that 'unless,'“ laughed the philosopher, cheerfully. “There's no 'unless' about it, Miss May.”

The girl jumped to her feet; for an instant she looked at the philosopher. She opened her lips as if to speak, and at the thought of what lay at her tongue's tip her face grew red. But the philosopher was gazing past her, and his eyes rested in calm contemplation on the gleaming paddock.

“A beautiful thing, sunshine, to be sure,” said he.

Her blush faded away into paleness; her lips closed. Without speaking, she turned and walked slowly away, her head drooping. The philosopher heard the rustle of her skirt in the long grass of the orchard; he watched her for a few moments.

“A pretty, graceful creature,” said he, with a smile. Then he opened his book, took his pencil in his hand, and slipped in a careful forefinger to mark the fly−leaf.

The sun had passed mid−heaven and began to decline westward before he finished the book. Then he stretched himself and looked at his watch.

“Good gracious, two o'clock! I shall be late for lunch!” and he hurried to his feet.

He was very late for lunch.

“Everything's cold,” wailed his hostess. “Where have you been, Mr. Jerningham?”

“Only in the orchard−reading.”

“And you've missed May!”

“Missed Miss May? How do you mean? I had a long talk with her this morning—a most interesting talk.”

“But you weren't here to say good−by. Now you don't mean to say that you forgot that she was leaving by the two−o'clock train? What a man you are!”

“Dear me! To think of my forgetting it!” said the philosopher, shamefacedly.

“She told me to say good−bye to you for her.”

“She's very kind. I can't forgive myself.”

His hostess looked at him for a moment; then she sighed, and smiled, and sighed again.

“Have you everything you want?” she asked.

“Everything, thank you,” said he, sitting down opposite the cheese, and propping his book (he thought he would just run through the last chapter again) against the loaf; “everything in the world that I want, thanks.”

His hostess did not tell him that the girl had come in from the apple orchard and run hastily upstairs, lest her friend should see what her friend did see in her eyes. So that he had no suspicion at all that he had received an offer of marriage—and refused it. And he did not refer to anything of that sort when he paused once in his reading and exclaimed:

“I'm really sorry I missed Miss May. That was an interesting case of hers. But I gave the right answer; the girl ought to marry A.”

And so the girl did.