

***MAY
SINCLAIR***

***THE JUDGMENT
OF EVE***

May Sinclair

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I

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It was market-day in Queningford. Aggie Purcell was wondering whether Mr. Hurst would look in that afternoon at the Laurels as he had looked in on other market-days. Supposing he did, and supposing Mr. Gatty were to look in, too, why then, Aggie said, it would be rather awkward. But whether awkward for herself, or for Mr. Gatty, or Mr. Hurst, or for all three of them together, Aggie was unable to explain to her own satisfaction or her mother's.

In Queningford there were not many suitors for a young lady to choose from, but it was understood that, such as there were, Aggie Purcell would have her pick of them. The other young ladies were happy enough if they could get her leavings. Miss Purcell of the Laurels was by common consent the prettiest, the best-dressed, and the best-mannered of them all. To be sure, she could only be judged by Queningford standards; and, as the railway nearest to Queningford is a terminus that leaves the small gray town stranded on the borders of the unknown, Queningford standards are not progressive. Neither are they imitative; for imitation implies a certain nearness, and between the young ladies of Queningford and the daughters of the county there is an immeasurable void.

The absence of any effective rivalry made courtship a rather tame and uninteresting affair to Miss Purcell. She had only to make up her mind whether she would take the wine-merchant's son, or the lawyer's nephew, or the doctor's assistant, or, perhaps, it would be one of those mysterious enthusiasts who sometimes came into the neighborhood to study agriculture. Anyhow, it was a foregone conclusion that each of these doomed young men must pass through Miss Purcell's door before he knocked at any other.

Pretty Aggie was rather a long time in making up her mind. It could only be done by a slow process of elimination, till the embarrassing train of her adorers was finally reduced to two. At the age of five-and-twenty (five-and-twenty is not young in Queningford), she had only to solve the comparatively simple problem: whether it would be Mr. John Hurst or Mr. Arthur Gatty. Mr. John Hurst was a young farmer just home from Australia, who had bought High Farm, one of the biggest sheep-farming lands in the Cotswolds. Mr. Arthur Gatty was a young clerk in a solicitor's office in London; he was down at Queningford on his Easter holiday, staying with cousins at the County Bank. Both had the merit of being young men whom Miss Purcell had never seen before. She was so tired of all the young men whom she had seen.

Not that pretty Aggie was a flirt and a jilt and a heartless breaker of hearts. She wouldn't have broken anybody's heart for the whole world; it would have hurt her own too much. She had never jilted anybody, because she had never

permitted herself to become engaged to any of those young men. As for flirting, pretty Aggie couldn't have flirted if she had tried. The manners of Queningford are not cultivated to that delicate pitch when flirtation becomes a decorative art, and Aggie would have esteemed it vulgar. But Aggie was very superior and fastidious. She wanted things that no young man in Queningford would ever be able to offer her. Aggie had longings for music, better than Queningford's best, for beautiful pictures, and for poetry. She had come across these things at school. And now, at five-and-twenty, she couldn't procure one of them for herself. The arts were not encouraged by her family, and she only had an "allowance" on condition that she would spend it honorably in clothes. Of course, at five-and-twenty, she knew all the "pieces" and songs that her friends knew, and they knew all hers. She had read all the romantic fiction in the lending library, and all the works of light popular science, and still lighter and more popular theology, besides borrowing all the readable books from the vicarage. She had exhausted Queningford. It had no more to give her.

Queningford would have considered that a young lady who could do all that had done enough to prove her possession of brains. Not that Queningford had ever wanted her to prove it; its young men, at any rate, very much preferred that she should leave her brains and theirs alone. And Aggie had brains enough to be aware of this; and being a very well-behaved young lady, and anxious to please, she had never mentioned any of her small achievements. Nature, safeguarding her own interests, had whispered to Aggie that young ladies who live in Queningford are better without intellects that show.

Now, John Hurst was sadly akin to the young men of Queningford, in that he was unable to offer her any of the things which, Aggie felt, belonged to the finer part of her that she dared not show. On the other hand, he could give her (beside himself), a good income, a good house, a horse to ride, and a trap to drive in. To marry him, as her mother pointed out to her, would be almost as good as "getting in with the county." Not that Mrs. Purcell offered this as an inducement. She merely threw it out as a vague contribution to the subject. Aggie didn't care a rap about the county, as her mother might have known; but, though she wouldn't have owned it, she had been attracted by John's personal appearance. Glancing out of the parlor window, she could see what a gentleman he looked as he crossed the market-place in his tweed suit, cloth cap, and leather gaiters. He always had the right clothes. When high collars were the fashion, he wore them very high. His rivals said that this superstitious reverence for fashion suggested a revulsion from a past of prehistoric savagery.

Mr. Gatty, on the other hand, had a soul that was higher than any collar. That, Aggie maintained, was why he always wore the wrong sort. There was no wrong thing Mr. Gatty could have worn that Aggie would not have found an excuse for; so assiduously did he minister to the finer part of her. He shared all her tastes. If

she admired a picture or a piece of music or a book, Mr. Gatty had admired it ever since he was old enough to admire anything. She was sure that he admired her more for admiring them. She wasn't obliged to hide those things from Mr. Gatty; besides, what would have been the use? There was nothing in the soul of Aggie that Mr. Gatty had not found out and understood, and she felt that there would be no limit to his understanding.

But what she liked best about him was his gentleness. She had never seen any young man so gentle as Mr. Gatty.

And his face was every bit as nice as John's. Nicer, for it was excessively refined, and John's wasn't. You could see that his head was full of beautiful thoughts, whereas John's head was full of nothing in particular. Then, Mr. Gatty's eyes were large and spiritual; yes, spiritual was the word for them. John's eyes were small, and, well, spiritual would never be the word for *them*.

Unfortunately, John had been on the field first, before the unique appearance of Mr. Gatty, and Aggie felt that she was bound in honor to consider him. She had been considering him for some time without any compulsion. But when things began to look so serious that it really became a question which of these two she would take, she called in her mother to help her to decide.

Mrs. Purcell was a comfortable, fat lady, who loved the state of peace she had been born in, had married into, and had never lost. Aggie was her eldest daughter, and she was a little vexed to think that she might have married five years ago if she hadn't been so particular. Meanwhile, what with her prettiness and her superiority, she was spoiling her younger sisters' chances. None of her rejected suitors had ever turned to Kate or Susie or Eliza. They were well enough, poor girls, but as long as Aggie was there they couldn't help looking plain. But as for deciding between John Hurst and Mr. Gatty, Mrs. Purcell couldn't do it. And when Aggie said, in her solemn way, "Mother, I think it's coming; and I don't know how to choose between them," her mother had nothing to say but:

"You must use your own judgment, my dear."

"My own judgment? I wonder if I really have any? You see, I feel as if I liked them both about the same."

"Then just say to yourself that if you marry John Hurst you'll have a big house in the country, and if you marry Mr. Gatty you'll have a little one in town, and choose between the houses. That'll be easy enough."

Secretly, Mrs. Purcell was all for John Hurst, though he couldn't be considered as exactly Aggie's equal in station. (They were always saying how like a gentleman he looked, which showed that that was the last thing they had expected of him. But in Queningford one does as best one can.) For all John's merits, she was not going to force him on Aggie in as many words. Mrs. Purcell deeply desired her daughter's happiness, and she said to herself: "If Aggie marries either of them, and it turns out unhappily, I don't want her to be able to

say I over-persuaded her. If her poor father were alive, *he'd* have known how to advise her."

Then, all of a sudden, without anybody's advice, John was eliminated, too. It was not Aggie's doing. In fact, he may be said to have eliminated himself. It happened in this way:

Mr. Hurst had been taking tea with Aggie one market-day. The others were all out, and he had the field to himself. She always remembered just how he looked when he did it. He was standing on the white mohair rag in the drawing-room, and was running his fingers through his hair for the third time. He had been telling her how he had first taken up sheep-farming in Australia, how he'd been a farm-hand before that in California, how he'd always set his mind on that one thing—sheep-farming—because he had been born and bred in the Cotswolds. Aggie's dark-blue eyes were fixed on him, serious and intent. That flattered him, and the gods, for his undoing, dowered him with a disastrous fluency.

He had a way of thrusting out his jaw when he talked, and Aggie noted the singular determination of his chin. It was so powerful as to be almost brutal. (The same could certainly not be said of Mr. Gatty's.)

Then, in the light of his reminiscences, a dreadful thought came to her.

"John," she said, suddenly, "did you ever kill a pig?"