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His Fiancee

He Had Intended to Be a Father to Her.

By ESTHER VANDERVEER

"I may not see you again for years. Will you be true to me?"

"Rather ask yourself whether you will be true to me. You are at an age when a man's fancy is liable to great changes."

"I shall not change in my feelings toward you."

"We shall see. Now, come and kiss baby; then you must be off."

Hugh Edgerton, twenty years old, had become enamored of a young widow, Mrs. Clara Pomeroy, two years his senior, with a child, a girl in her third year. He had been offered a position in a banking house in Hongkong, China, and was about to proceed there. Full of the hope of youth, he was intent upon making a fortune and returning to spend what remained to him of life with Clara Pomeroy for his wife.

He followed her into an adjoining room where the child lay asleep in her crib. Bending down, he kissed her.

"Dear little thing!" he said. "When I return I will be a father to her."

He took the child's hand in his, and so soft, so dear was it that he could

hardly bear to release it, but the mother admonished him that his time was limited, and drew him away.

"Goodby," she said; "whatever is in store for you and me in the future"—

"And baby."

"Yes, and baby. I will say this, you are a fine fellow and deserving of a good wife."

It seemed to Edgerton that the kiss she gave him lacked the fervor of a woman deeply in love. But it had always been so between them. The widow, though but a few years his senior, had a far wider range of experience than he, and a woman of twenty-two is usually much more mature than a man of twenty. When he regretted this lack of fervor she always said to him, "When ten or twenty years have passed it will be I who will have cause to reproach you for indifference."

While on his voyage to China Edgerton spent the most of his time writing letters to his fiancee. If an analysis of his feelings were possible it might show more distaste for leaving home and friends for a foreign land than love, but no one has yet been able to isolate love—as they say of germs—and, after all, our affections are largely a matter of association. Nevertheless Edgerton pined for his widow and the time when he would be united with her, and the dear child he had seen sleeping so peaceful and innocent in her crib was ever present in his mind.

Edgerton on arriving in Hongkong was given a position of some importance, for he had had several years' experience as a subordinate in business and was advanced rapidly. But unfortunately when he reached a status in which he might begin to accumulate the house he was with made some important losses and wound up their

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business. Edgerton joined forces with others and formed an independent house. They made money for a time, but one of the partners proved dishonest, and after getting him out of it they had a considerable deficiency to make up.

Meanwhile Edgerton wrote regularly to his fiancee and received letters from her. It was due to her encouragement that he was able to stand by what he had undertaken, for when ill luck befell him he was sorely tempted to give up and go home. He had with him a likeness of his fiancee, and, though the years were passing and each year added to her age, he continued to think of her as she had appeared when he parted from her. He always referred to her little girl as "the baby" and forgot that while her mother had passed the climax of youth and beauty the daughter was approaching it.

Years passed before Hugh Edgerton came to a status wherein he could close out his business in China and return to America with the fortune he had set out to win. Indeed, it was due to a fortunate rise in an article in which he had made an investment that at last enabled him to do so. It was a happy day that he announced to Mrs. Pomeroy that he was independent of the world and in a few weeks would return to claim her as his bride.

Sixteen years had passed since Edgerton had left his native land. He had been so engrossed in business that they did not seem to him more than six. Nevertheless he realized that there must be some change, especially in "baby." He pictured her as a girl playing with her doll, but nearing an age when she would lay it aside. Her mother doubtless would not have changed so much. True, she would be older, but not so very much older. As to Edgerton himself he was now thirty-six, an age wherein a man is supposed to be in his prime. His associations with women in China had been thus far with those who had not yet passed out of young ladyhood. Indeed the mothers of some of his women friends were but little older than he. One young woman of nineteen, an English girl, was hoping to win him when she was disappointed by the announcement that he was about to re-

turn to America.

The return voyage seemed endless to Edgerton, so eager was he to meet his fiancee and the little girl to whom he was to be a father. He pictured himself taking his ease in his own house, surrounded by his family. The loneliness of a bachelor life in a foreign country was now to be a thing of the past.

Edgerton was the first passenger to step ashore at San Francisco, and within an hour after landing he was speeding eastward on a railway train. The day and hour of his arrival was known to Mrs. Pomeroy, and Edgerton expected that she would meet him at the station. His impatience to see her caused him to hope that she would, but his aversion to the public witnessing their meeting caused him to hope that she would not.

She did not appear. Calling a conveyance, he drove to her home. A maid opened the door for him, and so sure was he that his fiancee would do so that he came near throwing his arms around the maid. He was ushered into a drawing room somewhat dimly lighted, but there was no one there. In a few minutes, hearing a light step on the staircase, he approached the door and stood waiting. A woman entered the room, and he caught her in his arms.

She submitted to the embrace, but did not return it.

"You are as you were when we parted," he said in a disappointed tone. "You were then without warmth, and you are without it now. I wonder how you could have been true to me all these years."

Standing off from her, he was astonished to see one who looked not a day older than when he had left her.

"Upon my word," he exclaimed joyfully, "you have not changed in the least! It is marvelous how you have retained your youth. I feel almost too old for you."

Now for the first time the lady ventured to speak, but she spoke not as a widow of mature age; she was rather a coy young girl. She haltingly told him that he said what he did in order to flatter her, whereupon he vowed that he spoke the truth, and he embraced her again.

(Continued on last page)

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