

OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

THE DAY OF THE O'HIGGINS

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By Margaret G. Fawcett

"T'S queer," mused Ann aloud, "how a seeming accident will change the current of one's life."

Instinctively (she had just returned from the seaside) the three young men in her drawing-room glanced at the slim hands idling in her lap, then, reassured, at her.

"One Sunday," she continued dreamily, "Dr. Wright, who preached regularly to the cottagers, was ill and Jane Murray's cousin came down to supply. He had the loveliest eyes and—"

"How long did he stay?" interposed Jimmy Holmes.

"Oh, he returned to town after the service. It's humiliating to reflect now—deprecatingly—that I once considered sewing in the St. Agatha my whole duty to the poor."

"I suppose he recommended a slum residence," commented Mr. Merriam disparagingly.

"He dwelt on the importance of personal contact," Ann admitted, "but father—regretfully—will not hear of settlement work."

"Bully for father!" cheered Patrick Opper.

Miss Castleton ignored him. "The St. Agatha secretary urged the adoption of a family—"

"A family?" It was a chorus of astonished inquiry.

"You visit it regularly, advise and assist it. I have taken"—Ann's tone was sweetly final—"the O'Higgins."

But seated next morning opposite Mrs. O'Higgins in one of the three rooms of that lady's dilapidated cottage, she felt less confidence in her fitness for the new role. As she sought diffidently for the right word with which to explain her presence, her new protegee, a plump untidy person with a roving, good-natured eye, came unexpectedly to her aid.

"You're one of them, I guess," she observed, her remark being the evident result of a hasty inventory of the visitors attire.

"One of them?"

"From the charities. I knew I'd sized ye up right," she continued when Ann gave a puzzled nod. "Ye wasn't stylish enough for a book agent and ye looked too wake-kneed to be sellin' sewin'-machines so I says to meself she'll be after bein' from the rale."

"Have you had other—visitors?" asked Miss Castleton, disappointed, for she had gained the impression that her seeds of kindness were to fall on virgin soil.

"Six before ye. An' th' first question they always ask is whether he's workin'." Well, ma'am—Mrs. O'Higgins folded her arms with an air of good-natured defiance—"he ain't. He had a half-day's job at McCartney's but 'twas only payin' him fifty cents th' mornin'; an' O'Higgins figgered ye couldn't fill eight mouths on fifty cents, so he quit."

"But surely it was better than nothing!" Ann expostulated.

"A mere drop in th' bucket, ma'am. Sure, when ye've raised six yourself, ye'll find ye can't take th' first job that comes along. Ye'll have to figger what it fetches in."

When Ann took her leave it was with the uncomfortable conviction that Mrs. O'Higgins had genially discarded the burden of her family and that it had settled heavily on her own shoulders. To Jimmy, Merriam, and Patrick, who dropped in that afternoon, she explained the urgency of the case, for the O'Higgins' rent was due Monday. "Now, the important thing," she concluded anxiously, "is to get O'Higgins work."

To each of the young men the remark presented itself in the light of an opportunity to further his suit with Ann, and from the reassuring chorus that greeted it she gathered but one impression—the industrial world was pining for recruits of the O'Higgins type.

"Then I'll just leave the matter in your hands," she said with a relieved sigh, and felt justified in accepting an invitation for the week-end in the country. But she carried the burden of the family with her, and on her return to town sought the cottage with some little trepidation, for she had heard nothing from her three aids. The beaming face of Mrs. O'Higgins, who met her at the door, reassured her.

"Sure, you're th' clever one!" she exclaimed admiringly as she waved her visitor to a chair. "O'Higgins is holdin' down three jobs an' wur'kin' at none of them. Th' last they sint us," she went on with apparent irrelevance, "was an old maid, but, faith, 'tis aisy to see ye c'n pick an' choose."

Ann frowned. "You said Mr. O'Higgins—" she suggested.

"'Twas like this," began her protegee, unabashed. "Th' afternoon of th' day ye was here, a little runt of a feller drives up in an awtymobiel an' asks if I'm Miss Castleton's Mis' O'Higgins. I was proud to admit it, ma'am, an' he asks for O'Higgins. Th' same bein' outside talkin' politics with Tony, th' Eyettalian, I had him in in a jiffy. I have th' promise of a job for ye, O'Higgins," says th' little man, 'which I hope to land in a few days, an' in th' meantime take this as a bit on account.' Th' bit, ma'am, was a tin."

Ann beamed at this evidence of Jimmy's good heart. The tender of the money was injudicious, perhaps, but—

Mrs. O'Higgins interrupted her musing. "That same night, as we was sittin' down to a bite o' supper, a foine-lookin' gentlemine in a plug-hat an' a posy knocks at th' door an' asks for O'Higgins. He says his name is Merriam an' he tells O'Higgins that he's chasing a job for him an' that, seein' he's hard up, he doesn't mind advancin' him a trifle. An' he hands him, ma'am, a tin."

"B." protested Ann, "Mr. O'Higgins should not have accepted money from both Mr. Holmes and Mr. Merriam!"

Mrs. O'Higgins bridled. "O'Higgins is not th' man to turn down a job or th' promise of one," she declared warmly. "An' when ye've raised six yourself, ma'am, ye'll think twice before flyin' in the face o' Providence. But to go on with me story. Th' next mornin' there stops at th' house a feller with his pants tuck'd into his boots an' a whip in his hand an' asks if I'm O'Higgins's wife. I don't deny it, ma'am, and he pulls from his pocket a little book an' takes out a bill. 'Tell him,' he says, 'that I have me eye on a job for him an' that he c'n pay me back when he's wur'kin'.' Says he. 'Thank ye for th' same,' says I, slippin' th' tin in me pocket, 'but I may as well tell ye first as last that there's two before ye—'"

"You shouldn't have taken the money at all!" cried Ann, horror-stricken.

"Wait till I've finished me story an' ye'll see who's th' crooked one," retorted Mrs. O'Higgins indignantly. "He asks me to explain, an' when I tell him about th' other two gentlemine he thinks hard for a minute. Then he takes out a foive from th' little book. 'Just give O'Higgins that,' says he, cautious like, 'an' tell him he's to wait for my job.' Ma'am, I spurns his money! 'O'Higgins,' says I to him, 'is not th' man to do a trick like that! Each of ye has paid him a bit o' money an' each will have his chanst. First come, first served—that's how it strikes O'Higgins.'"

And none of the arguments Ann subsequently offered shook the lady's confidence in the blamelessness of O'Higgins's course. After all, she reflected when, disheartened, she had taken her leave, morally deficient though the family had shown itself to be, it was less censurable than Patrick who offered that unaccountable bribe. She summoned the three to a conference and accused him publicly, to the delight of the other two. But Mr. Opper was not abashed.

"If I erred," he protested, "it was from no base motive. The task that confronts us is not merely the matter of finding employment for O'Higgins; the man's new environment must be considered. Having this in mind, I desired to reserve him for the job of handy man which I have persuaded my Aunt Eliza to offer him. Aunt Eliza, who has a wide experience with his class, will give him not only lucrative employment but the necessary moral brace."

Ann's first sensation on encountering the family in fashionable restaurants, at the play or in picture galleries under the guidance of one or the other of the three young men was, at first, a pleasurable one; but presently her smile became strained and she began to evince a morbid distaste for society. Had the O'Higgins really been benefited, she could have borne with their ubiquity, but the St. Agatha secretary, in a painful interview had hinted at demoralization. Yet Ann shrank from telling the three to cease their well-meant efforts.

"One wonders," she wrote, discussing the problem in a letter, "if removed from the manifold temptations of the city the O'Higgins might not develop the germ of self-respect?"

A week later she sent for Jimmy, Merriam and Patrick and announced that she had arranged for the removal of the O'Higgins into the country. "I'm in hopes," she said wistfully, "that a return to the soil—"

"Why," interposed Jimmy frivolously, "carry coals to Newcastle?"

Ann ignored, if indeed, she heard his little joke. "You have heard me speak," she observed diffidently, "of a cousin of Jane Murray's?"

"He returned to town after the service," said Patrick promptly. The others were silent, absorbed in watching the rich red hue that was mounting to the irregular line of Ann's brown hair.

"He came down later"—hurriedly—"to visit the Murrys. He—we—the O'Higgins—" She made

Rising, she moved a step or two to examine a small picture hanging on the wall.

"Oh, it's only some old saint! I thought it was Sothorn as 'Romeo,' of course," she murmured in a disappointed tone; and was about to explore further when the sound of silk whispering on the polished stairs sent her flying back to her seat just in time to rise from an expectant pose as Miss Fletcher entered and advanced smiling, with outstretched hand.

She was a tall woman, overtopping her visitor by a head, and her deeper coloring as well as the rich, mellow tones which made her conventional greeting almost caressing seemed to add to her air of gentle authority.

"I am very happy to see you, Mrs. Witherby," she said.

"You might say 'at last,' murmured that lady deprecatingly: "I wouldn't blame you. I meant to have called on you the very first of the season, but I don't know how it is, there's always so much to do, what with the housekeeping—everyone knows what that is in the country, where servants simply laugh you to scorn—and the Clio Club—we've taken up Russia this year, and the names alone are enough to drive you distracted. And now there's the Babies' Hospital; we've got to raise a thousand dollars this month if we don't want to lose another thousand that's been offered to us—you know that horrid Carnegie-Rockefeller way—and we're about at our wit's end. We've had lawn parties until every one is so tired of them that Dick says we'll never need another 'Keep off the Grass' sign in Rivergrove as long as the town exists. And—and we thought perhaps—"

"You thought perhaps I might help you out?" broke in Miss Fletcher, filling the breathless pause and smiling genially.

"It would be perfectly lovely of you!" declared Mrs. Witherby in a soft flutter, clasping her hands on her lightly crossed knees. "You see, we've never had any one living here before who was really distinguished. There have been actors and actresses who, it appeared, were very well known in Australia and Colorado, and even in Chicago and places like that; but no one seemed to have heard of them in New York. But now—You?"

"New York has been very good to me," said Miss Fletcher, smiling still, "and if I can be good to the babies I shall be very glad. I suppose you want a benefit. Let me know your plans and I will arrange to meet them."

"How sweet of you!" murmured Mrs. Witherby. "You don't know what a load you've taken off our minds." She went on. "I was saying yesterday, I simply would not play bridge again for charity this summer—not if I never saw another card. And that's a good deal to say; for what we should do without bridge in winter, I'm sure I can't imagine. But I know I'm taking up your time, though you haven't told me once you're 'a very busy woman'—the way some horrid women do who haven't accomplished half what you have. But I know you must be very busy every minute working up your new roles. So interesting—" she murmured, lifting her candid eyes in a childlike burst of admiration.

"Oh, no," Miss Fletcher hastened to disclaim. "I'm not working now. I'm just enjoying the lovely country about Rivergrove; and above all revelling in my dear garden."

"You've got so many pretty things here, too," said Mrs. Witherby, rising and pausing to glance around the room as she adjusted her veil.

"Don't go yet!" urged her hostess. "Won't you have a look at my pictures? I have some rather nice ones." As she spoke a frown contracted her level brows and she swept the room with a rapid glance until her eyes rested on a bowl of lilies of the valley half hidden by an intervening screen. "How careless of Janet! Excuse me a moment," she murmured, and lifting the bowl, she opened a window and placed it outside on the ledge. "I was sure I perceived the perfume; I can't endure it—just a foolish trick of mine," she explained, returning to her visitor, who had remained motionless, watching her with only half-veiled curiosity.

Miss Fletcher loved her books and pictures, and it was evidently a pleasure to her to show them, but her voluble new acquaintance had fallen suddenly silent and found little to say until she stopped in front of a small painting which her hostess had passed.

"How many Botticellis you have!" she exclaimed. "That's a very good copy isn't it? You must be very fond of him," she ventured.

"I am," said Miss Fletcher. "He means spring to me."

"I don't suppose I should recognize them all," the younger woman went on, "not knowing anything about art, really; only that my husband is fonder of Botticelli than of anyone and is always rummaging at sales for old prints or copies."

"Mr. Witherby has excellent taste, I know," said Miss Fletcher, politely.

"So people say," sighed his wife. "It seems to me that he is rather whimsical at times. My husband used to know you a little, I believe," she continued.

"Long ago, in Canada, wasn't it? He mentioned it when I told him I was going to call and ask you to help us out."

"Yes, in Canada long ago," Miss Fletcher's deep, sweet tones echoed the words.

"How beautiful your voice is!" said the other woman, pausing and staring a moment. "You made that sound quite different. It seemed to mean—all sorts of things."

The next moment she was exclaiming over the treasures which the bookcase contained.

"What beautiful bindings!" she sighed, dropping to her knees to study them. "We have just a few—"

Dick will buy them, though he knows we can't afford them. Shelly, Swinburne, Keats, Keats, Keats! Why, you must have copies of all the editions that were ever printed!" She straightened herself, and still kneeling, stared at Miss Fletcher, who had moved away across the room and was absently picking the dead leaves from a flowering plant.

"I thought we had about all there were," she continued in a moment, "but you have so many more. What an exquisite cover!" she exclaimed, taking a volume from the shelf and opening it carefully.

"Let me show you this carving," Miss Fletcher's voice broke in abruptly—it was almost harsh, and she advanced brusquely—"Such a beautiful carving; a friend brought me the other day from Japan; you must see it!"

But Mrs. Witherby seemed unaware of any interruption. Turning the leaves of the volume she held, she whispered:

"They are all marked—the ones he is always raving over and wanting to read aloud." As if unconsciously, she turned to the front of the volume, but suddenly she closed it resolutely, and rising, advanced upon Miss Fletcher, who had stood waiting and watching her nervously. "I didn't look to see who gave it to you," she said "I don't need to. I know now. You are the other woman. I always knew there was one."

"There always is one," said Miss Fletcher, facing her gravely.

"Yes," Mrs. Witherby conceded, "but for you, he never would have all those whims, those tastes—if you like that better. None of the rest—his brothers—and sisters—have them. This room is full of his fads," she went on, sweeping it with unfriendly eyes. "Why, just now, when you took away those lilies, with such a look of distrust, it came over me in a flash. He can't endure their perfume, either. The sweetest things! I wanted them for my wedding bouquet, but even then I had to give them up. I didn't know why. But I know now!" she added, bitterly—"it was because you didn't like them!"

"Just possible I didn't, because—he didn't," suggested Miss Fletcher.

"No! No! Men don't have those fancies. He's queer because you made him so. And I have to be queer—as far as I can—because you were so. It's insulting!" And dropping upon a couch, Mrs. Witherby turned her head away and let her eyes gaze into vacancy.

"I saw him a week or two ago," the other woman began from her seat across the room. "No, I mean saw him," she repeated, as Mrs. Witherby started and looked up. "Please understand that I had no suspicion he was living here when I happened on this place. He was walking that day I saw him, and I passed him in a cab. He did not look very 'queer,' as you call it. I wondered if it could be he. I don't believe I hurt him very much. He has grown stout; and he looked comfortable and—pardon me, since we are speaking so very frankly—a little bored."

"He is comfortable," asserted the wife; "I hope I make him so. And if he is bored sometimes, why so are all men after they've been married and settled half a dozen years—if they are happy."

"He—says so?"

"He doesn't need to say so," answered Mrs. Witherby, the color rising in her cheeks; "I can see it for myself."

"Oh yes, of course," conceded Miss Fletcher, and rising, she began to pace up and down speaking in her low, sweet voice as if unconscious of the other woman's presence. "It was such a beautiful time!" she sighed. "A dream filled with visions of spring-time, with low, delicious laughter and the pure joy of living. The common things of life turned new faces on us; for the first time we knew the mysterious happiness that fills the green depths of the woods, the aching sweetness of the hermit-thrush's lonely note. The moon shone for us alone above the quiet meadows or lighted us as we raced hand in hand over the long sparkling slopes of winter. The poets sang for us, leaning down to our hearts; Music made us her lute and we trembled responsive in one breath. Every smallest atom in my whole body lived and exulted in living—and what I felt, he felt. I had only to look in his eyes to be sure of it!" Her voice had risen with the rising tide of memory, and she stood now exalted, smiling.

A half-stifled cry called her back. "If it was all so beautiful," the other woman sobbed, "why didn't you go on?"

"Do dreams go on?" The exquisite voice had lost its exultant note and was very gentle now. "They seem to last a thousand years while we are dreaming them; their memory is often a part of our lives, but when we wake they are gone like a bubble that bursts. It was a dream, a mirage of youth. There is nothing to waste any tears on, believe me. He had to go to work, had his way to make, had you to marry by and by. I had my vocation calling to me; even then my foot was on the ladder. I could not stay any longer for a dream—since dreams do not last." As she spoke, she crossed the room, and dropping to her knees, bent her smooth, dark head above the fair, disheveled one that was still half-buried in the pillows.

"Don't you see that it was all a dream?" she whispered gently, "a dream—nothing more. And don't you see that if I am the other woman, he was another man? The man you married you have always had; he was never mine. And," she added, rising to her feet, "mine was never yours."

"Yes, perhaps so," and Mrs. Witherby, rising also, ignored the traces of her tears and smiled a rather crooked little smile. "But all the same, I have to live with your Keath and your Botticellis, and—and go without my lilies," she ended whimsically.

"And I?" asked the other, holding out her hand. "Is there nothing I must go without? It is the common lot. Good-bye. Count on me for the Babies."



G. HARKER

"I KNEW I'D SIZED YE UP RIGHT."

Ann, remorseful, hastened to accept on behalf of her protegee Aunt Eliza's offer, the value of which was enhanced by the fact that Jimmy and Merriam had nothing tangible in view. "But," she sternly cautioned all three, "no more money must be given the O'Higgins. To give money," she added, recalling a sentence in a letter she had received that morning, "is to shirk responsibility. Little acts of personal attention are the things that count."

At this remark Jimmy, who had looked depressed since Patrick's victory, brightened noticeably. It was not until the end of the week, however, that the nature of his inspiration was revealed. Ann, attending a matinee with Mr. Merriam, became conscious, just before the curtain rose, of a ripple of interest disturbing the audience. She glanced over her shoulder in time to see young Mr. Holmes piloting down the aisle Mrs. O'Higgins and the six young O'Higgins. That evening she wrote Jimmy an eloquent note of thanks and accepted the invitation which he tendered by return messenger to drive with him the next afternoon. In the park they encountered Mr. Merriam in his new car and the tone-deaf was filled with the O'Higgins!

But the sudden rise in Jimmy's and Merriam's stock was followed by a marked depreciation in Patrick's, the under-lying cause being Aunt Eliza's summary dismissal of O'Higgins. Ann, who called to learn the reason, was tartly informed that the man was hopelessly shiftless. Jimmy came to the rescue with the offer of an assistant janitorship, but Miss Castleton's faith in the easy redemption of the O'Higgins had been shaken and she felt a natural resentment against Patrick as being instrumental in bringing the knowledge home to her. To regain her favor, he took a leaf from Jimmy's and Merriam's book and inaugurated for the O'Higgins a career of social dissipation that made his rivals first blink, then jealously lend a hand.

valiant effort to overcome a growing confusion. "We have been corresponding this winter," she announced presently with dignity, "and he has been interested in the O'Higgins. A friend of his has an estate on Long Island, and Hugh—"

"Hugh!" It was a chorus of grievous inquiry. "Jane's cousin. He thinks the O'Higgins—"

"Never mind the O'Higgins!" they admonished her sternly. "We want to know about Hugh!"

"It was not to be announced until later and the date—"

"It's so, then?"

"Yes, it's so, faltered Ann. She glanced at them deprecatingly through her lashes. "Don't think," she said earnestly, "that I'll ever forget what you did for the O'Higgins."

THE OTHER

By HELEN PALMER

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PLEASE be seated, ma'am; my mistress will be down directly," said Miss Fletcher's English maid, and having seen the visitor comfortably seated in one of the low chairs in which the little drawing-room abounded, she raised a shade slightly and noiselessly disappeared.

Mrs. Dick Witherby, left alone, looked about her with eager, girlish curiosity.

"What a pretty room!" she commented inwardly. "It doesn't look a bit like an actress's, though. No photographs! I thought there'd be a lot of them in all sorts of queer dress or undress."