

# OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

## THE DAY OF THE O'HIGGINS

By Margaret G. Fawcett

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"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 him. 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 definitely for the right word with which to explain her presence, her new protege, 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 th' charities. I knew I'd sized ye up right," she continued when Ann gave a puzzled nod. "Ye wasn't stylish enough fr' 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 th' railafe."

"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 wor'kin'. Well, ma'am"—Mrs. O'Higgin folded her arms with an air of good-natured defiance—"he ain't. He had a half-day's job at McCartney's but it was only payin' him fifty cents th' mornin'; an' O'Higgin hoggered you couldn't fill eight mouths on fifty cents, so he quit."

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"A mere drop in th' bucket, ma'am. Sure, when ye 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'Higgin 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'Higgin 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'Higgin 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'Higgin, 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'Higgin 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 auld maid, but, faith, 'tis aisy to see ye c'n pick an' choose."

Ann frowned. "You said Mr. O'Higgin—" 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 awtymoeblin' an' asks if I'm Miss Castleton's Mis' O'Higgin. I was proud to admit it, ma'am, an' he asks fr' O'Higgin. He says his name is Merriam an' he tells O'Higgin that he's chasin' a job fr' him an' that, seein' he's hard up, he doesn't mind advancin' him a trifle. An' he hands him, ma'am, a tin."

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

Mrs. O'Higgin bridled. "O'Higgin 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 tuiked into his boots an' a whip in his hand an' asks if I'm O'Higgin'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 fr' him an' that he can't pay me back when he's wur'kin'.' says he. 'Thank ye fr' 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'Higgin indignant. "He asks me to explain, an' when I tell him about th' other two gentlemen he thinks hard fr' a minute. Then he takes out a foive from th' little book. 'Just give O'Higgin that,' says he, cautious like, 'an' tell him he's to wait fr' my job.' Ma'am, I spurns his money! 'O'Higgin,' says I to him, 'is not th' man to do a trick like that! Each of ye has paid him bit o' money an' each will have his chancet. First come, first served—that's how it strikes 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

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'Higgin; 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."

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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 to the O'Higgins. To give money," she added, recalling a sentence in a letter she had received that morning, "is to shirk the 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'Higgin 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 tonneau 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'Higgin. Ann, who called to learn the reason, was partly 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.

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.

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