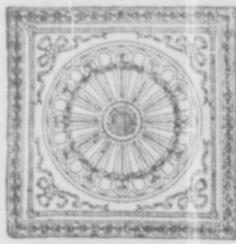


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(Continued.)

Angry and silently Honor framed the words in her own mind, "I am very glad—very glad, indeed." But for all that, there passed a little quiver across her lips, and for an instant the steeples of Kinbury and the long stretch of white highway were wrapped in heavy mist. Then she spoke with quiet unconcern.

"You must be very glad. Yours is rather a solitary life here."

"Mine is always a solitary life."

By mistake—most mortifyingly by mistake—she looked up to meet his eyes.

"I hope not," she said; and that was by mistake, too.

"It always has been," he answered, very low; "not quite idle, and not unhappy, but always solitary. Within the last few months there has dawned upon me the possibility of its being different—a far-off possibility, but bright and beautiful beyond my dreams. This since I knew you, Honor."

"He said you were not a girl on whom any man could bestow a strong affection." Honor had no need to bring these words from her memory, to array them in giant strength against these quiet words he uttered; the smart was too recent. Her eyes looked clearly on before her still, and her lip curled tremulously, as if its scorn were an effort.

"Miss Craven, I want to ask you if you will come and see my home. Mrs. Trent has offered to visit me, and to bring her daughter and her nephew. I had only to accept their kindness; but I would plead for yours. They are coming only for one day. Will you let me for that one day entertain in my house the only one in all the world who can make that home beautiful for me?"

"He said you were very well for an hour's amusement, but that any man would be a fool to offer you anything more serious than a passing flirtation."

Once more, with a deathless force, the memory came back and crushed the power of those earnest words he uttered. If only it had not been just in this hour that she had chanced to meet him!

"Thank you, Mr. Keith, but I think I will not come."

He stopped for a moment in his walk, looking down, with a searching eagerness, into her face. It was such a pure and innocent face, so thoughtful as well as bright, so quick to read truth and earnestness, so thoroughly true itself, that he knew he could trust the answer he should read there.

"He said you were not a girl on whom any man could bestow a strong affection." These words were in burning letters before her wide and angry eyes; at that moment he looked down and read his answer.

For many minutes after that they walked in silence; then, on the outskirts of the town Royden offered his hand—"It is good-bye, I suppose, Miss Craven. I will not tease you by again asking you to come with Mrs. Trent; but if you change your mind and come you will make me very happy—for that one day at least."

"You are very well for an hour's amusement—that's all." With these words surging in her heart, Honor answered very easily.

"Thank you, again, Mr. Keith; but there is no likelihood of my changing my mind, so I will say good-bye."

He raised his hat, and turned into a shop near which they had paused, his dogs following him, while Honor walked on slowly up the quiet street.

While he lingered here for Honor's sake, she walked on through the town, clinging childishly and eagerly to one thought.

"He said it; he did say it. Theodora told me so. It doesn't matter that they do not sound like his words. It doesn't matter that he does not look as if he

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would think them. He did say 'Theodora told me so.'"

The two junior clerks, who both nourished for Honor, in good-natured rivalry, a harmless and romantic passion, sprang from their stools when they saw her enter Mr. Haughton's office, and volunteered, in a breath, to go themselves, when she told them, after her pleasant greeting, that she wanted a messenger sent with a note to a certain surgery.

"I will wait in Mr. Haughton's room," she said, "for the answer."

She had no sooner entered the lawyer's private office than Mr. Slimp followed her, with a bland apology for his master's absence.

"Mr. Haughton was summoned to a client who lives at least seven miles away, Miss Craven, and I know it is his intention to drive straight home from there, without returning here again."

In vain did poor Honor try to hide her disappointment.

"I suppose there is a train this evening?" she said, taking up a time-table with fingers that trembled with nervousness.

"The last train which stops at Station leaves at 4.30, Miss Craven," rejoined Bickerton Slimp, with great officiousness, as he wheeled round Mr. Haughton's arm-chair for her, "and it is now after five. How may I assist you?"

"Thank you, but you can be of no assistance whatever," said Honor, moving away from the offered chair.

"If I may take the liberty of suggesting that I walk back with you," proposed Bickerton, smiling.

"But you may not take the liberty," said Honor, with quiet unconcern.

"I fear, Miss Craven," smiled the little clerk, insinuatingly, as he rubbed his hands softly together, "that I must be rude enough to force my escort upon you. Mr. Haughton would never forgive me if I allowed you unprotected to—"

"Send over to the hotel, if you please," interrupted Honor, "and order a fly for me."

Her tone was quite gentle, and even betrayed a little of the timidity she felt, but there was in it a note of such unquestionable though quiet authority that Bickerton Slimp turned and left the room at once to obey her orders. Whereabouts, on his way to the hotel, another resolution crossed his mind, he could not himself have told.

All through his absence Honor lingered at the window, where she had taken her stand when Mr. Slimp had invited her to the fire, and some one opposite, whom, in her absent mood, she did not notice, saw her, and presently she was aware that the bustling figure of Mr. Haughton's chief clerk—well known to her—joined her at the window, evidently to tell her something, which brought a startled fear into her face.

Prompt in all he did, Royden Keith walked down stairs and out into the hotel yard from which he had watched Mr. Slimp emerge. A few steps brought him to where one of his own grooms stood chatting with an hostler, and a few words explained his question.

"Mr. Slimp, sir," replied the hostler, touching his hat at every word, "came over just to say he supposed we had no fly at home just now."

"And had you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you happen to know if Mr. Haughton is at his office?"

"He is not, sir. He drove away early to-day. I took the carriage round myself, and he said he should not be back."

Royden walked straight to Mr. Haughton's office, and upstairs with the junior clerk to Lawrence Haughton's private room.

"Miss Craven," he said, not noticing Mr. Slimp's discomfiture at his appearance, nor seeming to notice how she trembled and shrank back, as if afraid of herself now that he had appeared. "I came across to ask you if you will take a seat in my dog cart. I am sending it—with the refinement inherent in him. Royden ignored the proposal of going himself—into Station, and my man can give the medicine in at East Cottage, and drive you on to the Larches. I am afraid they will be anxious at both places until you arrive, and so is it not a pity to linger here?"

"I was waiting for a fly," said Honor, her quiet voice faltering a little; "they are out at present, so I am watching for one to return."

"There is a fly in the hotel yard now, at your service, if you prefer it," said Royden, without a glance toward where Mr. Slimp stood, covering a little in his miserable attempt at ease. "Do you prefer it?"

"Mr. Slimp told me—understood," said Honor, watching curiously the face of her guardian's clerk, "that they were engaged, and that I could not have one."

"Mr. Slimp told you so," returned Royden, with calm irony, "but did not understand so. You shall go as you choose, Miss Craven. Do you prefer a fly?"

"Yes, if you please," said Honor, a mist of tears gathering at last in her eyes; so like a child she felt just then, because she longed to let him decide for

her and act for her, yet recoiled against this longing with fearful petulance.

"Mr. Slimp," said Royden, "will go across again, and this time will bring you the cab."

Not very comfortable were the feelings of Mr. Bickerton Slimp as he left the office, his only relief being the discovery that Mr. Keith was following him.

By the time the fly was ready to leave the hotel yard, Honor was at the outer door of her guardian's offices, but her heart fell to see that it was Bickerton Slimp who stood beside the hired vehicle, waiting for her. Just as she had taken her seat, however, Mr. Keith came up.

"Is it so," he asked, closing the door quietly in the clerk's very face, as he was on the point of entering; "is it so, Miss Craven that you need no escort now?"

"None," she said, eagerly, as she saw what was the clerk's intention; "none, please."

"I think," he reflected, in his leisurely tones, "that it hardly seems worth while to send my carriage out, now that this is going; and so may I beg you to allow my man the seat on the box here? He shall be no hindrance to you—a little help, perhaps, in guiding and arranging with the driver."

"Thank you," said Honor, quick to read all kind and generous motives.

"He is here now, and will be much obliged for the seat," observed Royden, as he stepped back from the closed door and raised his hat. Then, with great relief, Honor watched Royden's vallet mount the box before her.

(To be continued.)



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