

One Man In A Million

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To which came answer by messenger:
"Hon. John Garcide:

"My dear Garcide.—Can't go for two weeks. My foolnephew Jim is on his vacation, and I don't know where he is prowling.

"Hastily yours,

JAMES J. CRAWFORD."

"P. S.—There's a director's meeting at three. Come down and we'll settle all quarrels."

To this the Hon. John Garcide telegraphed: "All right," and hurriedly prepared to escort his sister and Miss Castle to the mid-day express for Sagamore Hills.

II.

Miss Castle usually rose with the robins, when there were any in the neighborhood. There were plenty on the lawn around the Sagamore Club that dewy June morning, chirping, chirking, trilling, repeating their endless arias from tree and gate-post. And through the outcry of the robins, the dry cackle of the purple grackles, and the cat-bird's whine floated earthward the melody of the golden orioles.

Miss Castle, fresh from the bath, breakfasted in her own rooms with an appetite that astonished her.

She was a wholesome, fresh-skinned girl, with a superb body, limbs a trifle heavy in the strict classical sense, straight-browed, blue-eyed, and very lovely and Greek.

Pensively she ate her toast, tossing a few crumbs at the robins; pensively she disposed of two eggs, a trout, and all the chocolate, and looked into the pitcher for more cream.

The swelling bird-music only intensified the deep, sweet country silence which brooded just beyond the lawn's wet limits; she saw the flat river tumbling in the sunlight; she saw the sky over all, its blue mystery untroubled by a cloud.

"I love all that," she said, dreamily, to her maid behind her. "Never mind my hair now; I want the wind to blow it."

The happy little winds of June loitering among the lilacs, heard; and they came and blew her bright hair across her eyes, puff after puff of perfumed balm, and stirred the delicate stuff that clung to her, and she felt their caress on her bare feet.

"I mean to go and wade in that river," she said to her maid. "Dress me very quickly."

But when she was dressed the desire for childish things had passed away, and she raised her grave eyes to the reflected eyes in the mirror, studying them in silence.

"After all," she said, aloud, "I am young enough to have found happiness—if they had let me. . . . The sunshine is full of it, out-doors. . . . I could have found it. . . . I was not meant for men. . . . Still. . . . it is all in the future yet. I will learn not to be afraid."

She made a little effort to smile at herself in the mirror, but her courage could not carry her as far as that. So, with a quick, quaint gesture of adieu, she turned and walked rapidly out into the hallway.

Miss Garcide was in bed, sneezing patiently. "I won't be out for weeks," said the poor lady, "so you will have to amuse yourself alone."

Miss Castle kissed her and went away lightly down the polished stairs to the great hall.

The steward came up to wish her good-morning, and to place the resources of the club at her disposal.

"I don't know," she said, hesitating at the veranda door; "I think a sun-bath is all I care for. You may hang a hammock under the maples, if you will. I suppose," she added, "that I am quite alone at the club?"

"One gentleman arrived this morning," said the steward—"Mr. Crawford."

She looked back, poised lightly in the door-way through which the morning sunshine poured. All the color had left her face. "Mr. Crawford," she said, in a dull voice.

"He has gone out after trout," continued the steward, briskly; "he is a rare rod, ma'am, is Mr. Crawford. He caught the eight-pound fish—perhaps you noticed it on the panel in the billiard-room."

Miss Castle came into the hall again, and stepped over to the register. Under her signature, "Miss Castle and maid," she saw "J. Crawford, New York." The ink was still blue and faint.

She turned and walked out into the sunshine.

The future was no longer a gray, menacing future; it had become suddenly the terrifying present, and its shadow fell sharply around her in the sunshine.

Now all the courage of her race must be summoned, and must respond to the summons. The end of all was at hand; but when had a Castle ever flinched at the face of fate under any mask?

She raised her resolute head; her eyes matched the sky—clear, unclouded, fathomless.

In hours of deep distress the sound of her own voice had always helped her to endure; and now, as she walked across the lawn bareheaded, she told herself not to grieve over a just debt to be paid, not to quail because life held for her nothing of what she had dreamed.

If there was a tremor now and then in her low voice, none but the robins heard it; if she lay flung face downward in the grasses, under the screen of alders by the water, there was no one but the striped chipmunk to jeer and mock.

"Now listen, you silly girl," she whispered; "he cannot take away the sky and the sunshine from you! He cannot blind and deafen you, silly! Cry if you must, you little coward!—you will marry him all the same."

Suddenly sitting up, alert, she heard something singing. It was the river flowing close beside her.

She pushed away the screen of leaves and stretched out full length, looking down into the water.

A trout lay there; his eyes were shining with an opal tint, his scarlet spots blazed like jewels.

And as she lay there, her bright hair tumbled about her face, she heard, above the river's monotone, a sharp, whiplike sound—swis-s-sh—and a silvery thread flashed out across her vision. It was a fishing-line and leader, and the fisherman who had cast it was standing fifty feet away upstream, hip-deep in the sunlit water.

Swish! swish! and the long line flew back, straightened far behind him, and again lengthened out, the single yellow-and-gilt fly settling on the water just above the motionless trout, who simply backed off down-stream.

But there were further troubles for the optimistic angler; a tough alder stem, just under water, became entangled in the line; the fisherman gave a cautious jerk; the hook sank into the water-soaked wood, buried to the barb.

"Oh, the deuce!" said the fisherman, calmly.

Before she could realize what he was about, he had waded across the shallows and seized the alder branch. A dash of water showered her as he shook the hook free; she stood up with an involuntary gasp and met the astonished eyes of the fisherman.

He was a tall, sunburned young fellow, with powerful shoulders and an easy, free-limbed carriage; he was also soaking wet and streaked with mud.

"Upon my word," he said, "I never saw you! Awfully sorry; hope I haven't spoiled your sport—but I have. You were fishing, of course?"

"No, I was only looking," she said. "Of course, I've spoiled your sport."

"Not at all," he said, laughing; "that alder twig did for me."

"But there was a trout lying there—I saw him; and the trout saw me, so of course he wouldn't rise to your cast. And I'm exceedingly sorry," she ended, smiling in spite of herself.

Her hair was badly rumpled; she had been crying, and he could see it, but he had never looked upon such tear-stained, smiling, and dishevelled loveliness.

As he looked and marvelled, her smile died out; it came to her with a distinct shock that this water-logged specimen of sun-tanned manhood must be Crawford.

"Are you?" she said, scarcely aware that she spoke. "What?" he asked, puzzled.

"Mr. Crawford?"

"Why, yes—and, of course, you are Miss Castle," he replied, smiling easily. "I saw your name in the guest-book this morning. Awfully glad you came, Miss Castle; hope you'll let me show you where the big fellows lie."

"You mean the fish," she said, with composure.

The shock of suddenly realizing that this man was the man she had to marry confused her; she made an effort to get things back into proper perspective, for the river was swimming before her eyes, and in her ears rang a strangely pleasant voice—Crawford's—saying all sorts of good-humored things, which she heard but scarcely comprehended.

Instinctively she raised her hands to touch her disordered hair; she stood there naively twisting it into shape again, her eyes constantly reverting to the sun-tanned face before her.

"And I have the pleasure of knowing your guardian, Mr. Garcide, very slightly—in a business way," he was saying, politely.

"Ophir Steel," she said.

"Oh, we are making a great battle," he said. "I'm only hoping we may come to an understanding with Mr. Garcide."

"I thought you had already come to an understanding," she observed, calmly.

"Have we? I hope so; I had not heard that," he said, quickly. "How did you hear?"

Without warning she flushed scarlet to her neck; and she was as amazed as he at the surging color staining her white skin.

She could not endure that—she could not face him—so she bent her head a little in recognition of his presence and stepped past him, out along the river-bank.

He looked after her, wondering what he could have said.

She wondered, too, and her wonder grew that instead of self-pity, repugnance, and deep dread, she should feel such a divine relief from the terror that had possessed her.

Now at least she knew the worst. This was the man!

She strove to place him, to recall his face. She could not. All along she had pictured Crawford as an older man. And this broad-shouldered, tanned young fellow was Crawford, after all! Where could her eyes have been? How absurd that her indifference should have so utterly blinded her!

She stood a moment on the lawn, closing her eyes.

Oh, now she had no difficulty in recalling his face—in fact the difficulty was to shut it out, for it was before her eyes, open or shut—it was before her when she entered her bedroom and sank into a cushioned chair by the breezy window. And she took her burning cheeks in both hands and rested her elbows on her knees.

Truly terror had fled. It shamed her to find herself thanking God that her fate was to lie in the keeping of this young man. Yet it was natural, too, for the child had nigh died of horror, though the courage of the Castles had held her head high in the presence of the inevitable. And now suddenly into her gray and hopeless future, peopled by the phantoms of an old man, stepped a living, smiling young fellow, with gentle manners and honest speech, and a quick courtesy which there was no mistaking.

She had no mother—nobody to talk to—so she had long ago made a confidante of her own reflection in the looking-glass. And to the mirror she now went, meeting the reflected eyes shyly, yet smiling with friendly sympathy:

"Silly! to frighten yourself! It is all over now. He's young and tall and sunburned. I don't think he knows a great deal—but don't be frightened, he is not a bit dreadful. . . . only. . . . it is a pity. . . . but I suppose he was in love with me. . . . and, after all, it doesn't matter. . . . only I am. . . . sorry. . . . for him. . . . If he had only cared for a girl who could love him! . . . I don't suppose I could. . . . ever! . . . But I will be very kind to him. . . . to make up."

III.

She saw him every day; she dined at the club table now.

Miss Garcide's hay-fever increased with the ripening summer, and she lay in her room with all the windows closed, sneezing and reading Anthony Trollope.

When Miss Castle told her that Mr. Crawford was a guest at the club, Miss Garcide wept over her for an hour.

"I feel like weeping, too," said Miss Castle, tremulously—"but not over myself."

"Dot over him?" inquired Miss Garcide.

"Yes, over him. He ought to marry a girl who could fall in love with him."

Meanwhile Crawford was dining every evening with her at the great club table, telling her of the day's sport, and how a black bear had come splashing across the shallows within a few rods of where he stood fishing, and how the deer had increased, and were even nibbling the succulent green stalks in the kitchen garden after nightfall.

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