

One Man In A Million

By Robert W. Chambers

DO you desire me to marry him?" asked Miss Castle, quietly.

"Let me finish," said her uncle. "Jane," he added, turning on his sister, "if you could avoid sneezing for a few moments, I should be indebted to you."

Miss Jane Garcide, a sallow lady of forty, who suffered with colds all winter and hay-fever all summer, meekly left the room.

Miss Castle herself leaned on the piano, tearing the pink petals from a half-withered rose, while her guardian, the Hon. John Garcide, finished what he had to say and pulled out his cigar-case with decision.

"I have only to add," he said, "that James J. Crawford is one man in a million."

Her youthful adoration of Garcide had changed within a few years to a sweet-tempered indifference. He was aware of this; he was anxious to learn whether the change had also affected her inherited passion for truthfulness.

"Do you remember a promise you once made?" he inquired, lighting his cigar with care.

"Yes," she said, calmly.

"When was it?"

"On my tenth birthday."

He looked out of the heavily curtained window.

"Of course you could not be held to such a promise," he remarked.

"There is no need to hold me to it," she answered, flushing up.

Her delicate sense of honor amused him; he lay back in his arm-chair, enjoying his cigar.

"It is curious," he said, "that you cannot recall meeting Mr. Crawford last winter."

"A girl has an opportunity to forget hundreds of faces after her first season," she said.

There was another pause; then Garcide went on: "I am going to ask you to marry him."

Her face paled a trifle; she bent her head in acquiescence. Garcide smiled. It had always been that way with the Castles. Their word, once given, ended all matters. And now Garcide was gratified to learn the value of a promise by a child of ten.

"I wonder," said Garcide, plaintively, "why you never open your heart to me, Hilda?"

"I wonder, too," she said; "my father did."

Garcide turned his flushed face to the window.

Years before, when the firm of Garcide & Castle went to pieces, Peter Castle stood by the wreck to the end, patching it with his last dollar. But the wreck broke up, and he drifted piteously with the debris until a kindly current carried him into the last harbor of all—the port of human derelicts.

Garcide, however, contrived to cling to some valuable flotsam and paddle into calm water, and anchor.

After a few years he built a handsome house above Fiftieth Street; after a few more years he built a new

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Are You Mr. Crawford?

wing for Saint Berold's Hospital; and after a few more years he did other things equally edifying, but which, if mentioned, might identify him.

Church work had always interested him. As a speculation in moral obligation, he adopted Peter Castle's orphan, who turned to him in a passion of gratitude and blind devotion. And as she bade fair to rival her dead mother in beauty, and as rich men marry beauty when it is in the market, the Hon. John Garcide decided to control the child's future. A promise at ten years is quickly made, but he had never forgotten it, and she could not forget.

And now Garcide needed her as he needed mercy from Ophir Steel, which was slowly crushing his own steel syndicate to powder.

The struggle between Steel Plank and James J. Crawford's Ophir Steel is historical. The pure love of fighting was in Crawford; he fought Garcide to a standstill and then kicked him, filling Garcide with a mixture of terror and painful admiration.

But sheer luck caught at Garcide's coat-tails and hung there. Crawford, prowling in the purlieus of society, had seen Miss Castle.

The next day Crawford came into Garcide's office and accepted a chair with such a humble and uneasy smile that Garcide mistook his conciliatory demeanor and attempted to bully him. But when he found out what Crawford wanted, he nearly fainted in an attempt to conceal his astonishment and delight.

"Do you think I'd buy you off with an innocent child?" he said, lashing himself into a good imitation of an insulted gentleman.

Crawford looked out of the window, then rose and walked towards the door.

"Do you think you can bribe me?" shouted Garcide after him. Crawford hesitated.

"Come back here," said Garcide, firmly; "I want you to explain yourself."

"I can't," muttered Crawford.

"Well—try, anyway," said Garcide, more amiably.

And now this was the result of that explanation, at least one of the results; and Miss Castle had promised to wed a gentleman in Ophir Steel named Crawford, at the convenience of the Hon. John Garcide.

The early morning sunshine fell across the rugs in the music room, filling the gloom with golden lights. It touched a strand of hair on Miss Castle's bent head.

"You'll like him," said Garcide, guiltily.

Her hand hung heavily on the piano keys.

"You have no other man in mind?" he asked.

"No. . . . no man."

Garcide chewed the end of his cigar. "Crawford's a bashful man. Don't make it hard for him," he said.

She swung around on the gilded music-stool, one white hand lying among the ivory keys.

"I shall spare us both," she said: "I shall tell him that it is settled."

Garcide rose; she received his caress with composure. He made another grateful peck at her chin.

"Why don't you take a quiet week or two in the country?" he suggested, cheerfully, "Go up to the Sagamore Club; Jane will go with you. You can have the whole place to yourselves. You always liked nature and—er—all that, eh?"

"Oh, yes," she said, indifferently. That afternoon the Hon. John Garcide sent a messenger to James J. Crawford with the following letter:

"My dear Crawford,—Your manly and straightforward request for permission to address my ward, Miss Castle, has profoundly touched me.

"I have considered the matter, I may say earnestly considered it.

"Honor and the sacred duties of guardianship forbid that I should interfere in any way with my dear child's happiness if she desires to place it in your keeping. On the other hand, honor and decency prevent me from attempting to influence her to any decision which might prove acceptable to myself.

"I can therefore only grant you the permission you desire to address my ward. The rest lies with a propitious Providence.

"Cordially yours,

JOHN GARCIDE."

"P. S.—My sister, Miss Garcide, and Miss Castle are going to the Sagamore Club to-night. I'll take you up there whenever you can get away."

(Continued on Page 7)