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A Ward in Chancery

I sat in my bath chair at the corner of the square alone, for I had sent my man to dispatch a telegram and it was pleasanter for me to wait on that quiet spot than in the busy thoroughfare. It was a warm day in mid-October. The sun shone with soft, mellow radiance on the yellow leaves that were clinging to the trees in the garden of the square or fluttering quietly to rest on their parent earth. No passengers were to be seen; but for the dull sound from the far-off streets the silence was profound.

The melancholy of autumn—that season of spent endeavor, of slow decay, of rest—was in the air.

Most of the houses in the square were shut, their owners not yet returned from the country; but one very large house was evidently inhabited. It filled the center of the block facing the square on my right. I was wondering what it could be for the building seemed too large for a private dwelling house, when my attention was attracted by a young man—a youth, I ought rather to say, for he did not seem to be more than 15 or 20—who was slowly pacing along the pavement close to the railings that enclosed the square garden, looking all the time at the large house I have just mentioned. It seemed almost as if he were expecting or hoping to see the face of some one he knew appear at one of the tall windows. And what particularly struck me was that as he walked he touched with his fingers every fourth one of the iron uprights that formed the railing.

He came nearer and nearer to me, still touching as he went, and then when he had reached the corner, without noticing me in the least, he turned round, and retraced his steps, still touching the railings. But it seemed to me that he did not lay his hand on the same uprights that he had touched before.

This circumstance stimulated my idle curiosity. Those who have known as I have what it is to lie for many hours too weak to read or talk, prey to wandering fancies, will understand me when I say that I became intensely anxious to know why he was touching those railings. There did not seem to be any way of satisfying myself on this point, and I strove—this will explain my state of mind as well as anything I can say—into the square, sure that he was really putting his fingers on different uprights from those he had touched when he was walking toward me. There was a ready way of settling this point. Every fourth upright higher than the others, and I observed that he had touched the high ones as he came toward me. If he touched one of them now, I was wrong; if he touched the next to one of the high ones, then I was right.

The youth laid his fingers on that I was right beyond the tall one every time. And so he went on till he reached the further corner of the square.

I thought he would turn and come back again. I was sure he would. He did, touching the railings as before. And this time he touched the uprights on my side of the tall ones. That meant that he was systematically touching every one of them. My curiosity, satisfied on this point, immediately reverted to the more important question—what could be the young man's reason for behaving in this extraordinary way?

He came slowly nearer, and just as he was about to turn around, obeying an impulse, I called to him. He stopped and he gave a little guilty start as if aware for the first time that he had been observed, and hesitated as if he had made up his mind to walk away.

"Don't go," I said, and my voice reached him easily in the quiet autumn air. "You see I can't do you any harm, the only way to speak to you for a moment."

He left the railings and came up to my chair, and then I saw that he was really a very nice looking boy with an open, pleasant face that just now was slightly flushed.

"Would you mind looking down that street," I began by way of breaking the ice, "and telling me if you see a man—a servant out of heavy-coating this way?"

He stopped aside so as to obtain a view down the side street and said that no such person was in sight.

"Would you like me to wheel you a little way?" he asked.

"No, I think I will stay here. But your kindness in offering to do that encourages me to ask you to do me one small favor."

"Oh certainly."

"Then will you tell me why you touched every fourth upright in the railings as you passed along just now?"

The young man's cheek flushed with shame and annoyance, and he replied rather sharply, "I can't conceive, sir, how that is any business of yours."

"You are perfectly entitled to make me that answer," said I with a smile, "and to tell the truth, I quite expected that you would. But as you see, I am an invalid, and, being unable to go about as you can, little things are apt to acquire an unnatural importance in my eyes. My curiosity has been roused, and if you can see your way to gratifying it I should really feel obliged to you. Besides, you know you promised to do me a favor."

"Oh, well," said the youngster in an off-hand way and with a toss of his shoulders that I thought became him vastly, "if you care to know, the fact is I was seeking for a mark on the railings—a signal."

"Yes?"

"You see that big house opposite? It is a girls' school and one of the young ladies there—"

He stopped and hesitated for a word, blushing furiously.

"With whom you are in love?"

"I suppose you would call it that. She is very ill and I don't go to ask how she is. They wouldn't tell me if I did."

"But why?"

"Because she is a ward in chancery, and they have got an injunction."

"Against you?" Upon my word, my young man, you are beginning early."

"Don't make fun of me, please, sir. I can't stand it, and I might say something that would not be respectful and be horribly sorry for it afterward."

"I assure you I am not laughing at you nor thinking of such a thing," said I. And as I looked into the lad's ingenious face I wished I could have had such a boy to call me father. "But I don't understand yet about the signal," I added.

"It was Carrie Embleton, one of the little girls who promised that if Winnie was better she would make a wicker seat on one of the railings, but I haven't been able to find it. And I am afraid she will not get better; she may die and I shall never see her again."

"How would it do if I were to go to the house and ask for her?"

"Oh, sir, if you would! And do you think I might go with you?"

I pondered for a moment, and just then Jenkins, my man, came round the corner of the street. That gave me an idea.

"Suppose you take my man's place and wheel me up to the house?" I said. "Then you will have to help me up the steps, for I can't walk by myself, and I can make the excuse that I want to have you within call to bring you into the sitting room. If you are not afraid of being recognized that might do."

"I don't think Mrs. Melrose would recognize me coming as your servant, and if she did it wouldn't matter, she could only turn me out." As he spoke he laid his hand on the long handle of the chair.

I dispatched Jenkins on another errand and the young man wheeled me up to the big house. On the way I asked his name, and he told me it was Edward Hetherington.

We were admitted without difficulty, and as we waited for the mistress of the house to appear my companion whispered to me something rather important which I had quite forgotten. The young lady's name, he said, was Winnie Gordon, and she had neither father nor mother.

Mrs. Melrose swept into the room, a well-developed specimen of her class, and came up to me when she perceived my helpless condition. Hetherington stood modestly near the door.

"I called to inquire," I said, "after the health of one of your pupils in whom I am interested—a Miss Gordon. I was told that she was seriously ill."

"She was, but I am glad to say that she is better. She is to come downstairs today for the first time since her illness."

"I am sincerely glad to hear it," said I. "May I ask you the nature of her illness?"

"Nothing infectious, I assure you. A sort of low fever. The foolish child fancied herself in love with a very presumptuous young man. Perhaps you may know the circumstances?"

I said I knew something of them.

"Well, she was so silly as to allow that to upset her considerably. And this news about her uncle has, of course, regarded her recovery."

"Her uncle?"

"Yes. Have you not heard? It is really the most scandalous thing. Mr. Gordon was believed to be one of the wealthiest men in Omaha. He was very indignant when he heard of the love affair I alluded to and immediately told his solicitor to settle £100 for him on Winnie so that he might make her a ward of chancery and be able to get an injunction against the young man—I forget his name."

"Hetherington?"

"Yes, of course, that is it. Well, now it turns out that the man's wealth was all sham and pretense. He has been practically a bankrupt for years, and I may tell myself lucky that I was paid my last term's bill. Of course, I shall get nothing for this term, but fortunately it has just commenced."

"Then you mean that Winnie must go out to India?"

"That would be a wild-goose chase," said the schoolmistress with a little scornful laugh. "No one knows precisely what has become of Mr. Gordon—at least, I have not been able to learn anything of his whereabouts, and I fancy more than one of his creditors would give a good round sum to get his address."

"Then what is to become of Winnie?"

"That is just what I should so very much like to know. I hoped, when the servant told me you had come to inquire for her, that you might have something to propose—something in the nature of a home to offer her."

I shook my head.

"Then what is to become of the poor child I cannot imagine. She is too young to earn her own living—much too young. I cannot send her to the workhouse, and yet I cannot be expected to keep her here for nothing."

"No one surely would be so unreasonable as to expect that you would voluntarily do a thing of that kind," I exclaimed, and the lady looked at me very sharply to see whether I was speaking ironically before she replied, "I must try to get her into some orphanage, but I fear it will be very difficult."

As she said these words the door opened and a girl of about 15 came shyly into the room. She was not strikingly pretty, but her expression was gentle and sweet and she was pale as from a recent illness.

I beckoned her to come to me, and without noticing the young man who stood half in hand behind the door she came close to my chair wondering, no doubt, who I was and what I wanted with her.

Mrs. Melrose considerably left us to ourselves, and my temporary servant drew a few steps nearer as soon as the door had closed behind her.

"My dear," I said, taking her by the hand, "there is some one here who is very anxious to see you."

She followed the direction of my eyes and then with a little scream her hands were clasped about my neck. And the next I knew was that they were in each other's arms.

I had forgotten all about the chancery division of the high court of justice and its ridiculous injunction, but it was scarcely worth remembering now, when there was no one who cared to enforce it. Perhaps she had thought it necessary to go out of the room or at least to turn my back. As it was, I might have shut my eyes, but this did not occur to me. It was most touching and beautiful to watch the innocent raptures of the two young lovers. There was no time for words, and it was plain that they had a better language than any verbal one. A broken sentence now and then was all they seemed to need. The lad's face was radiant, his eyes burning, his whole frame quivering with excitement, and as for Winnie, she seemed to be literally drinking in great draughts of happiness.

As I looked I made up my mind.

"Hetherington, my boy," said I, "be good enough to retire for a few moments to the other end of the room or outside of the door, whichever you prefer. Winnie, come here."

She came close up to me, and I said, "Give me your hand."

She put her slender little hand in mine.

"I know your story, my child," said I, "but you do not even know my name. As you see, I am an old man, at least, compared to you, and a cripple. I have an



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Incidentally, I'm so glad you close the subject of 'Chinese Women,' said Mrs. Plushy to Mrs. Gushy, who had just finished reading her paper. "The subject is so interesting. I never tire of hearing about the poor things."

"Mersey" thought the author of the paper. "I hope no one else stops to congratulate me before I get home. These new shoes pinch me so I can't stand it another minute!"—Detroit Free Press.