# The Debt of Honor

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"DON'T, don't make me answer you again, Mr. Courtney! I never shall marry—how could I?—while my aunt needs me as she does. I am so sorry, more sorry than I can ever tell you, that this has happened. I ought to have prevented it. My aunt must have some one to turn to. This mere money support I can give is the least important. You know—who understands better?—all she needs."

"I knew exactly what you would reply," he said. "That was the one reason why I waited. But—you understood."

She flushed deeply, bending her head over her needlework, in which woman's refuge she seemed to find sanctuary. "But I—I couldn't say to you earlier how utterly impossible this is, not—not before you spoke to me. Now—oh, it is so out of the question that it ought to be easy to forget all about it, at once."

As if assuming his consent, to prove her own power of quick forgetting she went on practically: "I felt glad when you came in this evening that I was here alone, because I have been wanting to speak of something to you. Would you mind telling me what rent you have been paying for this apartment?"

Courtney sat looking at her, embarrassed, without reply. "I know—" said Miss Ireland, "that is, I know now, since you do not answer, what the apartment costs. The janitor told me. It was a godsend, a rescue, when you rented these rooms to us. I sha'n't ever forget what you did for us then. Never! I don't offer now to make up any of the arrears that really are due to you. But you have kept only one-third of the apartment for your own use. If we stay on here, we must pay you a just proportion, not this nominal rate."

"What have you to do with it?" laughed Courtney. It was not often that he was thus caught unready. "My transaction was with your aunt. She likes, I think, to keep at least the semblance of the reins in her hands. Don't you think you would, in her place? She is a bit older than you."

"Oh, I know how good you are to her, how you understand her," she cried gratefully. "It isn't that I want to rule, to interfere—" She broke off unhappily, and he rose to stand by her, his hands on the back of her chair.

"What is it you do want?" he asked. "To carry all the family cares on these slender, slender shoulders? Look at mine. What yours stagger under would be such a feather-weight to them. Your duties," he entreated, "let them be my duty—your people, my people. You have refused me today for every reason on earth—but one. You have not once said that you cannot learn to love me."

For a moment she closed her eyes; but as she opened them again, looking full into his, he drew back. "No," she answered steadily, "I have not once said I cannot learn to love you. How could I say that? I can say—I do not love you, not in the least in the way you wish; of that I am very sure. I never would have let that grow up between us. I have my responsibilities. I wish to carry them—unshared."

He stood aside from her, listening silently, and she went on as if turning to him again, as she had learned to turn, for comfort, for support, advice.

"You must see how dishonorable it would be for me to listen to you—for a moment. We have been, by accident, thrown together in ways that have appealed to you unduly. You are so kind, impulsive, so generous! Don't you see—you have been led to believe that it is more than kindness you are feeling for me? You shall not burden yourself, hamper your career. Oh, why do you make

it so hard! You always call yourself '*struggling*'"—her laugh was near to tears. "Compared with us, with our brightest prospects—You speak as if you and we were alike compelled to economize. You—" She laughed again. "Oh, Mr. Courtney, you haven't the slightest idea of what economy is!"

But he did know what economy meant for them, all that her hesitations admitted, and he could not endure the thought. There was no hunger now, thank God, nor cold, no present fear of either; both had been sickeningly near them in the past. What security was there against them in an unprotected future?

"I understand," he agreed gently. "Don't struggle so to explain everything. I can see your position. I honor it. Perhaps it was not fair for me to speak—not yet, placed as we all are; but you needn't be troubled. It's all said and answered, and—over now."

She turned to him with a sigh of relief, deep, unconscious, touching. "Oh, you always understand. If you had persisted—you can see what must have happened! I would never in words have made conditions; but we have been so happy here, so safe. It would have been hard to——"

He nodded understandingly. "I accept your condition," he agreed. She was competent, he knew, for any quick action that called for courage, for resolve. He believed that she would have been capable of sweeping her charge into the streets unsheltered, within the hour, if he had refused to yield at once to her unspoken condition. She held the key to the position.

"I NEVER SHALL MARRY WHILE MY AUNT NEEDS ME AS SHE DOES."

"There shall be nothing here to disturb you," he said gravely. "I pledge myself not to urge—anything—without your permission, given me in words, or implied." He had turned as if to leave her, when his glance fell on the supper-table, placed in the center of the small living-room, where they had been sitting.

The table was set for the evening meal with a solitary plate. "One plate?" he asked. "You were to eat your supper alone to-night?"

"I am to eat my supper alone to-night," she replied. "My aunt has run away to a neighbor's. She loves a little frolic of that kind. But she always leaves me some sort of surprise in the refrigerator—a consolation gift! She thinks I must be lonely. She would be."

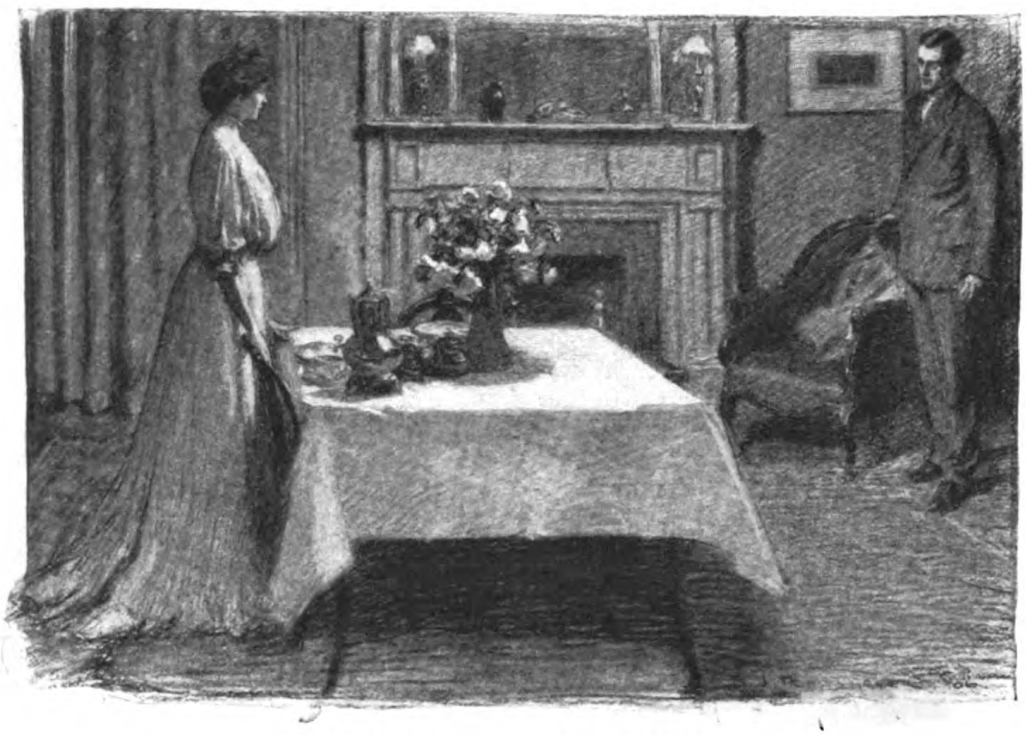
"What of me? I eat three meals a day, every day, alone. No one seems to think I need comforting."

"Perhaps you don't look as if you did. You have never seemed to me exactly an object of pity."

"No—" he admitted, "I'm afraid I don't have such a bad time."

But his glance returned to the table, lingered again on the homelike tea-tray, the old thin-worn silver spoons, the ancient-patterned urn. Through what sacrifices had these heirlooms been preserved?

"Couldn't you—?" he ventured. "You don't mean to say you won't ask me to supper! Your aunt always urges me to stay when I drop in near a meal-time. She's the soul of hospitality. You know how vexed she will be if I tell her that I was here, longing



HER EXPECTANT MANNER WAS AN INVITATION.

for a cup of tea, hungry for wafer-bread and butter—how do you cut it so thin!—and you sent me away thirsty, hungry. There's a delicious surprise, plenty for both of us, in that small refrigerator. Do you want all of it yourself?"

"No-o."

"Of course," he went on seriously, "if you really don't want *me*——"

Looking up at him doubtingly, her manner suddenly changed. She seemed to determine to carry through the practical rôle she had decided upon. "There is no reason in the world why you shouldn't stay to supper—if you really want to," she said. "You are more than welcome to thin bread and butter and tea, or whatever happens to be here." Traditions of hospitality seemed to reprove her. "I shall be glad to have you stay to supper to-night, Mr. Courtney." She spoke with a pretty graciousness, folding her work as she rose. "Will you excuse me while I look for it?"

Courtney had always believed that he understood who was responsible for the delicate refinement of these small rooms. As a home-lover, he had felt, when he crossed the threshold, that indescribable atmosphere which only a woman, and by no means every woman, can create.

After a first clumsy effort toward assistance, he stood aside, following the young housekeeper with his eyes, noting, half with amusement at his own disappointment, that she set his place, not opposite her own, but, after a moment's hesitation, at the angle side of the board.

If without straw she could weave so sweet a nest, if while playing the man's part in the world outside, she could still become so adorably wise in woman's lore, what might she not accomplish where she was the heart, the very secret of a home. . . .

The bread lay sliced in wafer sheets, the chafing-dish bubbled, the tea-urn hung steaming in its rack, when Miss Ireland glanced toward her guest, and stood by the table, waiting. Her expectant manner was an invitation, but he did not move; and she was forced to speak.

"Supper is ready," she said, adding, "I thought that you were hungry!"

Why the smiling summons, the homely little scene, so moved him, Courtney tried to tell himself he did not know. He drew out the chair for his hostess, and gravely took his own place at the table. It was she who spoke first, tilting the tea-urn in its rack and holding it poised over the empty cup.

"How many lumps of sugar?" she asked.

"One, if you please."

"And cream?"

"No cream, thank you."

He glanced up soberly at her.

All that delightful, unreasoning laughter of youth that, despite her air of responsibility would so often and unexpectedly light Miss Ireland's face, broke suddenly in the gray eyes. "But of course you may laugh, if you want to," she said, and laughed aloud herself, pretty, contagious laughter. . . .

Courtney leaned back in his chair, emptied plate before him, teacup in hand.

"But which," he asked, glancing about the table, "is the refrigerator surprise? Have we eaten it?"

"No, it hasn't appeared on the table yet. It's a dessert to-night. My aunt left it in the refrigerator covered with a plate. I had to promise her not to open it before I finished my first course. Shall we look at it now?"

Courtney glanced down into his cup. "Might I have a drop more of tea?" he begged. "This cup of tea is the only one I ever felt enthusiasm for."

"It's the fresh boiling water," stated the young housekeeper. "The second cup will not be so good, unless"—she hesitated—"unless you will wait for fresh water to boil."

He drew out his watch, looked at it, shamelessly appeared to hesitate.

"How long does it take water to boil?"

"Ten minutes or so."

"Then—but isn't it too much trouble?"

She was already pouring fresh water into the tea-urn and relighting the lamp under the rack. Then, with folded hands, she sat watching the spout of the urn.

"I know this much about housekeeping," Courtney reproved her, "that you must not watch the pot. Suppose I tell you a story while we wait. I heard a good one the other day. It's a love-tale. The man of the story—he's an old friend of mine—is about my age; the woman, she's almost old enough—not quite, perhaps—to be his mother. Can you see any romance in that?"

Miss Ireland, her half-empty teacup poised in her hand, laughed, with a little wry face.

"Don't let me spoil the story, but— How could he! How could she!"

"*She* couldn't. That's the point of the story. She wouldn't do a thing but laugh. To her, it was absurd, out of the question; but he made her consider it seriously enough to refuse him definitely, refuse him repeatedly. She had never married, I don't know why; but there was nothing of the old maid about her. He's old for his age, a big-bodied, big-brained, square-jawed fellow, hard for any one to deny—man or woman."

"She was attractive?"

"Oh, beautiful!—very, witty, high-spirited, and good as gold. He took me to see her, and I hadn't been with her five minutes before I knew why he cared nothing about the difference in their ages. Age could not wither her! Once in love with her, no man would have cared if she were a hundred; he couldn't! There was nothing for him to do—but run. I begged him that night as we walked home together to go abroad, anywhere; and it wouldn't be easy even then. And it was such a fool's errand for him—win her or lose her, he lost. It was a wretched match for either of them."

"You didn't *say* all that to him?"

"Yes. Not that it made any difference. He agreed that I was right. 'Anybody in his senses must call it folly,' he said. 'There's every reason in the world against it, except one—the only excuse that makes it possible—right. We love each other; it's too late for either of us to draw back.'"

Miss Ireland looked up surprised.

"But I thought you said she——"

"I did say she had told him, over and over, that she cared nothing, sentimentally, for him. His point, as he then explained it to me, was that he—didn't believe her. He had made up his stubborn mind, from what evidence I couldn't gather—I don't think he quite knew himself—that, without being at all conscious of it, she cared for him deeply. Of course such things have happened. We have all known cases where—" Miss Ireland was bending to hold her finger over the spout of the tea-urn as if testing a steam that was yet to rise. She had glanced up quickly at Courtney's face as he spoke, then turned again to the unresponsive urn.

"No," she said. "I have never known such a case. I can't see why he persisted in not believing her."

"Neither could I see. It seemed to me his *duty* to believe her. I told him so. I assured him I could not detect anything—word, look, tone—in her manner to him that ought to encourage his hoping for anything other than the respect and friendship that she was evidently willing to give him. He was perfectly obstinate. He said he knew she had learned, slowly, to care for him; and,

SHE GAZED UP AT HIM VAGUELY, STILL BEWILDERED, BREATHLESS.

that being his conviction—what was his duty?"

Miss Ireland sat looking down thoughtfully a moment before she replied.

"If"—she said presently—"if he had taught her—any woman—to love him, why then—yes, I suppose he owed it to her to——"

"No, no, that was not at all the line of his argument. His debt of honor, as he saw it, was not so much to her, as to the love that he maintained existed between them. An emotion so deep—this was the position he took—so sacred as a great love, a love that not every one can have, is owed the birthright of recognized existence. Nothing vital separated them, there was no moral obstacle; a love like theirs, he insisted, became a thing alive, real as flesh and blood. To kill it would be—murder. He said it was like a child brought into the world, a responsibility, not to be ignored, neglected, nor abused. He went so far as to claim that duty to this wonderful emotion rose higher than an obligation to possible happiness. Suppose they married, and found good reason for the world's rooted objection to unequal marriages. Still—so he argued—they would have to feel their course justified. Loyalty to such a love demanded taking all risks. He believed there was no risk for them. He meant to marry her—if he could induce her to consent. He had told her all this, his theory of life, love, honor; and he had also told her that he knew she loved him."

"And what had she replied?"

"Laughed in his face, he said. 'Care for you!' she cried. 'How could I?' But she agreed with him, seriously enough, that a great love was a debt of honor. Her stronghold, you see, was that she knew she cared nothing about him—as a lover. From that position he could not shake her. Isn't that the strangest love-tale?"

Miss Ireland was silent a moment; when she spoke it was hesitatingly. "They were both right, I suppose. A great love must be—its own excuse; but she was in a position to know——"

"Ah, wait—not every woman in the position of the lady of my story would have the courage to admit any such premises. When a woman agrees that she will yield if she discovers that she greatly loves, that—that leaves to her lover—doesn't it?—only the burden of proving to her that she does love?"

Little gusts of steam were now fitfully blowing from the tea-urn. Miss Ireland sat watching them rise. "No woman, in her case," she said slowly, "would dare to admit—anything, unless she were very—very sure of herself. Her frankness would have to prove her indifference, it seems to me. It ought to have proved it—to them both."

"Ah, wait again. You haven't heard the end of my story. He burst into my office the other day the happiest man in the world. They are married."

"Married!"

"Yes, it came off quite suddenly—abroad. They have been married some weeks. It seems she concluded the affair had run on long enough; and when she left this side, as she had been for some time planning to do, she went suddenly, with no word to him but a line of farewell, telling him it was best that he should not see her before she left.

"He took the next steamer over and traced her to the town where she was staying. There were some ruins near by, and she was walking there alone when he arrived. When he found her she was sitting on the verge of one of the old towers. She heard his step and turned quickly. He told me all this as frankly as he had the first of the story. When she recognized him, she rose quickly and stood looking at him, plainly very much troubled, he said. There wasn't the least sign of encouragement about her. She looked merely annoyed. 'You shouldn't—' she said. 'No, no, you shouldn't have done this!' and as she spoke she was retreating. Before he could call out to her, she had gone farther than she knew and was on the edge of the parapet. The old stone crumbled under her heel, and she would have dropped over the wall if he had not sprung forward and caught her in his arms. While he still held her, while she looked up at him, their eyes meeting, her face near his—he was only human, I suppose—he kissed her. He said it was no surprise in the world to him when she spoke. As soon as his lips touched hers, when he saw the color flood over her face, he knew the one reply she could make—she was his; he had only claimed his own. She said: 'Yes, I love you. Yes—I care. I think—I have always cared.' And the whole struggle was over.

"They climbed down from the tower and went to the nearest town and were married. I don't think they will ever regret it. It was strange—wasn't it?"

Miss Ireland was moving the teacups nearer to the urn, and her gaze was fixed upon the china; there was something restless in her motions. "So strange," she said, "that I

can't understand it. Why should she change for no new reason? No," she repeated, "she seems to me weak. I don't *like* her part of the story."

"Her husband still explains her—and I imagine he knows," Courtney replied—"as thoroughly self-deceived. He knew, all the while, what fire there was beneath that snow. Perhaps—perhaps it was the simple, old, old story of the Sleeping Beauty. His kiss waked her, it may be, not to love exactly, but to *knowing* that she loved. To be roused suddenly to a great, an unimagined, love—can't you understand that it would sweep one away? The awakening, the surrender, seem to me very natural, the most simple part of the whole story." He was speaking more and more slowly, as if uncertain what he might find himself saying; he was not looking at her. "You must always remember that the lady of the story had already admitted to her lover—and such an admission is an agreement—that if a woman awoke to know she loved deeply, he should honor her debt, pay it in full. That was all she did." As if his pause questioned her, Miss Ireland glanced up at him. He spoke slowly. "You think," he said, "you think one *couldn't* be loving like that unconsciously. I know—it is quite possible."

The tea-urn steamed high in its rack, and Courtney sprang up to lift it from the flame. The water was bubbling and tumbling, almost boiling out of the spout.

"It pays, sometimes, not to watch things too closely," he said. "May I pour the tea—for both of us?" He served the tea, laughing at his own mistakes, enjoying his own awkwardness, dropping the tea-ball, spilling the water, beyond redress confusing the tea-tray. He had used in his operations any available cup, bowl, and saucer in reach before Miss Ireland moved, taking his self-appointed task from him.

Then it was the "refrigerator surprise" that engrossed his attention. Must he wait for it longer? Did honor demand that they still leave it to chill in the ice-chest? The refrigerator was in the little hall—he remembered it was there. Might he fetch in the surprise now? Without waiting for reply, hurrying from the room, he left her alone. . . .

The dessert the refrigerator yielded, the concealed surprise, proved to be a small pitcher of griddle-cake batter, mixed and ready for frying.

Miss Ireland sat looking in dismay at the prize disclosed.

"Oh, dear, dear aunt," she laughed. "Isn't this just like her? To think of her taking the trouble—just for me! And she believed I should want to fry them for myself alone. I should have had to cook them, too, or hurt her feelings. Do you care for hot griddle-cakes and sirup, Mr. Courtney?"

"I? Why, the very last time I took supper here, your aunt gave me griddle-cakes and sirup. I ate—I lost count, purposely."

Miss Ireland laughed reminiscently. "I do remember now. You won't lose count to-night. I am not the cook my aunt is."

Courtney's spirits seemed undashed. "I can always eat my way to glory," he maintained. "I am to have the same kind of sirup on my cakes? May I milk the little brown cow myself?"

"The *brown cow*—oh, you mean the old china sirup-jug? It is quaint, isn't it? My aunt is as fond of it as of her old silver."

"So am I. I want to lift it by its twisted tail again, and see the sirup dribble from its mouth. That's more fun than eating the cakes—what? Don't tell me you forget where it's kept stabled. I'm sure I saw your aunt take it out of that corner closet yonder."

He rose, but quicker than he, declaring that she now remembered precisely where the little brown cow was kept tethered, she had caught up a tall stool and, carrying it to the closet, sprung lightly upon it; before he could prevent her, she was reaching high toward the bovine sirup-jug, on the tallest shelf of the cabinet.

As she stretched up both hands Courtney turned suddenly and sprang toward her. Whether her foot had slipped, or the stool tilted as she lifted her arms, he did not see; he was too late to avert the blow of the swinging door, which she grasped in falling; but he was in time to catch her in his arms before she reached the floor.

He steadied, and stood motionless, supporting her, looking down into the face he held pressed close against his breast; and as she gazed up at him vaguely, still bewildered, with lips parted, breathless—suddenly the color came, flooded over her face, her brow, her throat.

She was his! Had he but to stoop to claim his own?

"Dear," he cried, "I am only human! Don't you—don't you *now* understand? You love me—you care. I think—I think you have always cared!"