THE SLENDER FIGURE: A STORY: BY ANNIE HAMILTON DONNELL

HE MOVED slowly, stopping many times from house to field. The halting and feeble gait had the curious effect of having but recently become a part of old Byam Pritchard—as if the recentness must be somehow apparent to lookers-on. As a matter of fact, three days before old Byam had trudged from his little house to his little field with straightened back and unfaltering old legs. The change had come with the heavy letter of David’s wife that was in his pocket now. He appeared to list over to that side as he halted along. One particular plaint was uppermost in his mind to the exclusion of lesser woes. He would never again be able to potter about getting his own supper of bread and milk after Serena Toole, who “did for” him, had gone home for the night. It was at suppers that he kept up his brave pretense of Mother—only at suppers. Now he must give that up—it would be like burying her again. The old soul of him revolted; a sob fought in his throat.

He was going in search of the Child, who was his only confidant. The load he had borne alone for three days cried out to be shared, and there was only the Child. Only she knew that he filled two bowls instead of one with milk and ate his suppers with Mother. The pathos and comfort of the old man’s little play had appealed in a curious, grown-up way to the woman-soul of the Child.

She came darting on slim little legs to meet him. “What’s the matter, Dear?” she called. It was a name for him of her own coinage. “You’ve been cryin’ inside o’ you. So’ve I been cryin,’ only, gracious, I did it outside!” Shoes ’n’ stockin’s again—Aunt Ellen won’t let me go barefoot.” She broke off quickly at closer sight of his troubled face. Here was something worse than shoes and stockings.

Old Byam fumbled for the heavy letter. In a tremulous voice he read it to the Child, his fingers fluttering the crisp pages. “That was written three days ago,” he said at the end, “an’ they’re comin’ tonight.” “Oh—tonight!” Even the serene little mind of the Child was startled at the suddenness of it. She adjusted hurriedly the little scales of her judgment and weighed thoughtfully the pros and cons of this sudden thing. To the amazement of old Byam it was congratulation rather than sympathy that she proffered after a slight hesitation.

“Oh, that’s nice, Dear! She’s a woman, ain’t she? Of course she is, if she’s a wife! Then I’m glad she’s comin.’ Aunt Ellen says you ought to have a woman to take care o’ you all the time—a stiddy one. So if she’s a stiddy woman——”

Somberly, he nodded. David would not have married an un-
stiddy wife. "Well, then, it's all right. Aunt Ellen says a old man hasn't got any business——"

"She hasn't got any, David's Wife ain't, nor your Aunt Ellen!" he flamed forth. "Nobody's got any business to take care o' me if I don't want to be took care of!" He threw out his hands as if beat ing back the stranger wife of David—the interfering aunt of the Child—an interfering world.

"I want to be left just as I be—just as I be!" he fumed, glaring at the Child in the need of someone to glare at. She rocked her little thin knees, sitting in the grass. The Child was thinking deeply.

"I know!" she exclaimed at length, "We'll practice her comin'! Then you won't mind it so much. It's because she's a very strange person; you're kind of scared, Dear. Gracious, I'd be!—if my son's wife came an' took care o' me without bein' introduced a speck! What we got to do is to get used to it 'fore she gets here. I know a splendid way!" She was on her feet, thrilling with power to overcome even this obstacle in their path.

"You leave it to me. All you got to do is put on a white shirt an' a collar an' all o' your best clo' es an' come on out to the Pines 'bout four o'clock. We'll have a whole hour to practice; the stage don't get here till after five."

The Child rattled on excitedly. The possibilities of this Practice Play intoxicated her. She teetered on one foot in the joy of creation.

"I'll be David's Wife, you know. All o' the things you'll have to say to her you can say to me an' get used to 'em. We'll practice 'em. I'll dress up, too. You'll see me a-comin' toward you an' you'll put your hand out so an' say 'Why, this is a—a unexpected pleasure! Oh, I know the way!—you wait! I'll tell you every single thing to do, Dear. You just be there at the Pines at four o'clock."

The day dragged uncannily. When it should have been noon it was ten o'clock; at four it was only two. Old Byam ate the dinner Serena Toole laid out for him with exasperating slowness, to take up time. The thing that he dreaded he longed to have "over with." When Serena Toole had plodded home at length he went out to the pantry and took down Mother's bread-and-milk bowl and carried it to his own room. It shook in his old hands; it might have been full of the heavy tears of his soul. Then he put on his best suit and went to the Child under the Pines. She trailed to meet him, funny and serene in Aunt Ellen's long skirt and bonnet.

"I'm David's Wife," she announced airily. "I persume you're David's father, ain't you? You look 's if you were. (Now say: 'This is a unexpected,' quick!)"

It was an "unexpected" that old Byam said. "I didn't ask you
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to come! You can go back to where you came from!” he flashed out. Though his eyes twinkled at the odd little figure before him, his old lips were grieved like a child’s. “I’ll be honest with you, ma’am—it goes against the grain to say I’m glad to see you. I ain’t! I’ve been dreading you all day; seemed as though I couldn’t stan’ it! Folks haven’t any call to come till I ask ’em to—when I want you I’ll say so, ma’am.” It was a relief to unburden his mind though only to this little impersonator of David’s Wife; he could at least say it all to her.

“Gracious!” The play that had been cast for a pleasant comedy was turning out to be a tragedy. The Star caught her breath with the suddenness of it, then plunged with the zest of true genius into her part. With haughty pride she spoke her impromptu lines.

“Sir, you insult me! I—I am surprised that David ever allowed you to be his father. I wouldn’t have! Here I’ve been an’ came to take care o’ you—”

“I don’t want to be took care of! I want to be left as I be! Just because I’m old—you’ll be old some day, everybody’ll be! Folks can choose for themselves if they be old!” Suddenly he began to sob. It was the piteous grief of old age and the Child, who was a woman-child, forgot her little mummy and sank down with him in the grass and comforted him. They were lost to their surroundings; the old pines sighed over their heads in soft sympathy.

DAVID’S Wife and David did not come on that afternoon stage, nor on the next afternoon’s. Instead, a letter came then from David: “Dear Father, we’ve put it off, as you see. Mary’s little plan collapsed at the last minute—too bad we couldn’t have let you know yesterday, but we had to decide all in a minute. Better luck next time! You’ll have to get along as you are, after all—”

To Byam Pritchard it was a respite. He drew long breaths again and went back and forth from his little field to his little house with brisk steps. The Child found him her cheerful comrade, as before, and the little tragedy-play under the Pines was forgotten.

Then one day, presently, Serena Toole failed to put in an appearance and the simple machinery of old Byam’s household bade fair to stop short. In the midst of his perplexity old Byam looked up to see a slender figure standing in the door. It nodded and smiled.

“Mrs. Toole isn’t able—isn’t coming today,” the Slender Figure said, “she thought I might do. I’m Mrs. Toole’s summer boarder. If you could show me where the pots and pans are—if you like parsnip stews, I can make beautiful ones!”
Like ’em—parsnip stews! Mother had made beautiful ones, too. Old Byam flew about fussily, showing the Slender Figure the “ropes” that started the domestic machinery in the sunny little kitchen. The two of them worked together; in an hour they were on most friendly terms—old Byam was laughing.

“This is fun! May I come tomorrow? I never was made for a boarder,—honestly I couldn’t stand it very long! My husband says I was born with a mixing spoon in my mouth! If you’d let me come over tomorrow—maybe you’d like my raspberry pies!”

She came next day. He liked the parsnip stew, the raspberry pies—he liked the Slender Figure. When Serena Toole came, instead, the days were blanks to old Byam Pritchard and he sent back hinting little messages to the Slender Figure. To the Child he confided his preferences.

“Sereny’s a good woman—a dreadful good one. But that slender little woman that comes over instid of Sereny beats me! It ain’t just her cooking—it’s her. I declare I ain’t laughed so much since Mother and me used to. She reminds me o’ Mother.”

Some night—old Byam did not confide this even to the Child—he meant to ask the Slender Figure to stay to supper. With him and Mother—he got down Mother’s bowl and polished it with tender hands. He would fill it in the beautiful old way—he had a warm certainty of faith that the Slender Figure would understand. Some night—he would wait a little longer.

The late summer days merged into the soft glory of autumn. Serena Toole, by September, had ceased to come over at all; quite in the natural course of things the Slender Figure had taken her place. It did not occur to old Byam to wonder at the permanence of the new arrangement; the comfort and delight of it occupied his mind. For eight peaceful weeks he had been happier than he had ever dreamed of being again. He refused in his stubborn old mind to consider a possible end to the happiness.

The Child’s summer stay had come to its close, but he scarcely missed the Child.

“Good-bye, Dear,” she said mournfully. “Last summer you was sorry!” but old Byam was watching a slender figure waving to him from his doorway.

“I got to be going in to my supper,” old Byam said. It was the appointed night; he had invited the Slender Figure to supper. She had made a little ceremonial feast of it with flowers on the table and Mother’s full bowl at Mother’s place.

“Good-bye!” the Child called after him, “I’m goin’, so there,—I think you’re mean not to be sorry! The stage’s a-stoppin’ to your
house!” she added in sudden excitement. As indeed it was. Old Byam’s strained vision caught a glimpse of a broad-shouldered figure getting out; he stiffened, his old face losing its childish anticipation. David had come—and David’s Wife! He was filled with impotent wrath that they must come tonight and interrupt his little feast. Tomorrow, some other night,—they might have waited.

He fell into the plodding gait of the very old. When he reached his door only David was there. A sudden gust of affection caught at old Byam’s heart-strings and pealed a welcome to this big son—he could be mighty glad to see David, just David.

“Father! This is great. Don’t count the trunks—We’ve come, bag and baggage! You can’t get rid of us!”

“She—David’s Wife—your wife, Davy,—I s’pose she’s here, too?”

“Mary? Bless you, yes! Mary’s in the house. Father, don’t you worry—you’re going to like her. I’d like to see you help it!”

David’s big voice was confident and jubilant. But the old face of Byam Pritchard was unassured. He gazed wistfully toward the house that the last weeks had found so homelike and pleasant; all that must end now.

Suddenly the Slender Figure stood in the door, waving to him.

“Supper is ready!”

The Slender Figure looked undismayed. There was even a new radiance on her gentle and sweet face. She was smiling in the door.

“Come, David—come, Father!” she cried.

The Slender Figure was David’s Wife—was Mary! Old Byam felt his heart stand still, then leap into exultant beats. He felt an impulse to shout, as the Child would have done. His happy house of cards fell about him and here, in its place, sprang up this wondrous abiding one. He felt the foundation of it, firm under his old feet.

She was coming up to him.

“If you don’t call me Mary the first minute!” she threatened.

“You, Mary!” he cried out. David laughed in both their faces.

“You’ll have to forgive me, anyway, Father! She did it—Mary’s the conspirator. You see, we came up across lots from the station that night and heard what you said to the Kiddie in trailing skirts. Mary understood right off and had me right-about-face in a jiffy, marching me back to the station. ‘I know a better way,’ says Mary.”

This was the better way.

“Come in to supper,” Mary said with fine attempt at matter-of-factness, but the woman heart of her melted at sight of old Byam’s happy bewilderment. She slipped a slender hand through the old man’s arm. “I haven’t taken it off,” she whispered, and he knew that she meant Mother’s bowl of bread and milk.