



The CRYSTAL

by Josephine Daskam Bacon

CRYSTAL-Gazing was for a long while the rage at the Russian Court. But all the crystal-gazers are not necessarily freaks. Molly Dickett a trained newspaper woman, in a condition of nerve-jag sees—well, what she saw had a lot to do with what she ultimately did.

IN reviewing the matter dispassionately, it seems difficult to find anybody (anybody, that is to say, to whom her career was or is of the slightest interest) who omits to pronounce Molly Dickett's life an egregious and shameful failure. I should be sorry for anyone, for instance, who had the hardihood to address her mother on the subject, for Mrs. Dickett's power of tongue is well known in and beyond local circles; and since Eleanor married young Farwell, who stands in line for cashier of the bank forty or fifty years from now, if all goes well and a series of providential deaths occurs—indeed ever since Kathryn became assistant principal at the High School (because, as her mother points out, a mere teacher's position, even in a High School, may not be much, but an assistant principal may be called to consult with the trustees any day, and Kathryn has twice refused a college professorship)—since these family adjustments, I repeat, Mrs. Dickett's tongue has grown steadily more incisive and her attempts at scaling the fortress of Mr. Dickett's wardrobe more encouraging.

I believe it to be the simple truth to say that she literally never mentions her second daughter, and that Molly sends her letters direct to the factory to be sure that her father gets them—for Mrs. Dickett is Napoleonic in her methods and would really, I am afraid, stop at nothing. Any woman who has borne three children and will learn to drive an electric runabout at the age of forty-five, for the purpose of taking her husband home from his office in it, is to be reckoned with, you will agree.

The last time she is known to have referred to the girl definitely was when she announced the theory that her unfortunate name lay at the bottom of it all.

"Molly," she is reported to have said, "was named by her father—a mistake always, I think. The fact that Eleanor was baptized Ella has little or nothing to do with it; there was never any 'Nellie' or 'Lellie' about it, and at sixteen she began of her own accord to write it Eleanor. Kathryn I named entirely myself—and after all, what can Aunt Ella be said to have done for Eleanor? A silver ring and a bracelet when she graduated! But it was always 'Molly Dickett's all over the town!'"

AND it must be confessed that this was so, if, indeed, the confession proves anything. Nevertheless, Mrs. Dickett cannot deny that for a long time, up to the period of her plunge into outer darkness, Molly was confessedly the flower of the family. Eleanor was rather soggy, a creature of inertia, chocolate caramels and a tendency to ritualism which her mother could not have foreseen when she encouraged her entering the Episcopal communion. Kathryn her mother pronounced "a very ordinary girl, very ordinary indeed," up to the day when she was graduated, head of her class, at the state normal school.

But Molly was neither soggy nor ordinary, being distinctly handsome in a gray-eyed, black-haired, white-skinned way, a clever student, an original conversationalist—in short, a personality. Unlike the usual victim to an older and a younger sister, she managed to get quite her fair share of the family dignities and finances—was, in fact, accused by her sisters of using undue influence in persuading her father to send her to a woman's college. It is most

characteristic of her that at this accusation she refused the favor, interested her teachers in her cause so that they procured her a full scholarship at the college of her choice, and actually completed a four years' course there with no other means than her share of the twenty-five dollars yearly placed in his daughter's bank accounts by their father since the birth of each. On this slender sum, plus the accruing interest, eked out by college journalism, which began to be mentionable in those years—the early nineties—strengthened further in the last terms by tutoring, did Molly Dickett triumphantly assert her independence, and I tell it of her at this length so that none may throw "rolling stone" at her, in what followed.

A young woman of eighteen who can set her course in solitude and steer it, alone, friendless, except for what friends her qualities can make her, absolutely unaided but for her own exertions, for four years, is not to be called lacking in application, I submit. She got out of that business just what there was in it, and so, she insists, she did at every stage of her subsequent history. Note this, for it is important.

Here you see her, then, at twenty-two: handsome, accomplished, independent, well rated on her particular 'Change—one fairly hears Dick Whittington's bells in the air! Her mother, when Molly wrote home the news of her appointment as under reader in the office of one of the new cheap magazines that began to appear with such frequency at about that time, spoke of her with the typical respect of the dependent woman for the wage-earner, and never dropped that note till the crash came.

By the time Molly had been for two years at her post in Slater's Monthly, Kathryn had moved back to her normal school as instructor—"and they paid well to get her, too," as Mr. Dickett informed his stenographer confidentially. She had been invited to supper more than once, had the stenographer, in the old days, and there had even been a little talk of Kathryn acquiring this accomplishment, once, but Mr. Dickett was far too wise to suggest her presence at the half-past six dinner nowadays.

He was far too wise, indeed, was Mr. Henry Dickett, to do anything that seemed likely to ruffle the increasingly easy currents into which his bark had drifted of late. In a vague way he had always counted on supporting four women until three of them—or two, say, for Kathryn was plain and rather managing—should marry; and lo and behold, all three were off his hands in a twinkling, and there was a pretty little nest-egg growing for little Henry (for Eleanor had been very discreet about the first baby).

So now we arrive at the day when Molly left her desk in the anteroom of Slater's, walked through the book department and the art offices and encountered Miss Spinner, the little dried and spectacled reader of forty-odd years, and centuries (or their equivalent) of magazine experience.

"Miss Spinner," said Molly, "do you mind telling me what they pay you a week?"

"Twenty-five," Miss Spinner replied promptly. "Not at all. Of course I'd been fifteen years at Franklin Square, and it was all that experience that made them offer me the three dollars raise. So I left. But, of course, there are five magazines now where there used to be one. In ten years I think there'll be ten. So does Mr. Slater. That means competition, and that means that experience will

always be worth something to the new ones. You started at fifteen, you see, and of course I only got ten. Gracious, isn't that Mrs. Julia Carter Sykes's voice? Perhaps you'd better step out, my dear, Mr. Slater's talking with that English prison-man and said that he wasn't to be disturbed if the Twelve Apostles came!"

Molly went with her swift, unhasty step (she had long legs) and received Mrs. Julia Carter Sykes urbanely, as befitted the best paid woman novelist of her country. Occasionally she had the fancy to "trot around to the office," as she called it; it was believed that she "picked up types" there.

"YOU'RE much too pretty to be here, my child.

Do you like it?" Mrs. Julia Carter Sykes remarked, impertinently (she was supposed to believe that her manner was that of the English aristocracy, and asked the most embarrassing questions of everybody with an income of less than fifteen thousand a year).

"Not very much," Molly replied, placidly, "it's a little dull. I'm thinking of going into journalism. Couldn't you give me some letters to some of the editors? I could do good special article stuff, I'm sure."

"But certainly!" the novelist cried. "You are too delicious! I'll write you a card to Hecht himself this moment—I'm dining with him to-night—and I'll speak of you. I'll tell him to send you to interview me at Bonnybraeside."

"Thanks," said Molly, laconically, and rose to show the celebrity to Mr. Slater's sanctum.

Molly left Mr. Slater somewhat puzzled. He offered to raise her salary three dollars, might have been pushed to five, but she merely smiled deprecatingly.

"It isn't exactly that," she said, "but there seems no outlook, somehow. I don't think it's a very reasonable profession—if it is a profession."

He exploded into the name of a great English novelist who held precisely that position.

"Yes. But I am not a great novelist, you see," said Molly, and cleared out her desk with the swift thoroughness that characterized her. She put a clean sheet of green blotting-paper on it before she left, and washed out the inkwell herself.

"That stenographer spells worse and worse, remember," she remarked. "I'll look in for any mail."

AND so, for a year, she did, and they were all delighted to see her, for few people likely to enter such offices can talk more amusingly than did Molly Dickett. She had always used her material well, when it was limited, and now, when it bumped into the Himalayas at one end (her famous Rajah of Bhutpore interview) and rounded the hitherto speechless promontories of Spud Connor's career, the champion heavyweight of the world (she actually drew vivid metaphors from him and he gave her a tintype of himself at eight years), the entire staff gathered round her when she came, and Mr. Slater, under a temporary financial cloud, wept literal tears because he could not afford to buy her back to them. It was, of course, the Bonnybraeside interview that did it. So cleverly was this column-and-a-half of chatty sharpshooting manoeuvred that Mrs. Julia Carter Sykes sent hundreds of copies to her friends, while her fellow celebrities giggled among them-