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Happy Heart Comes to Canada

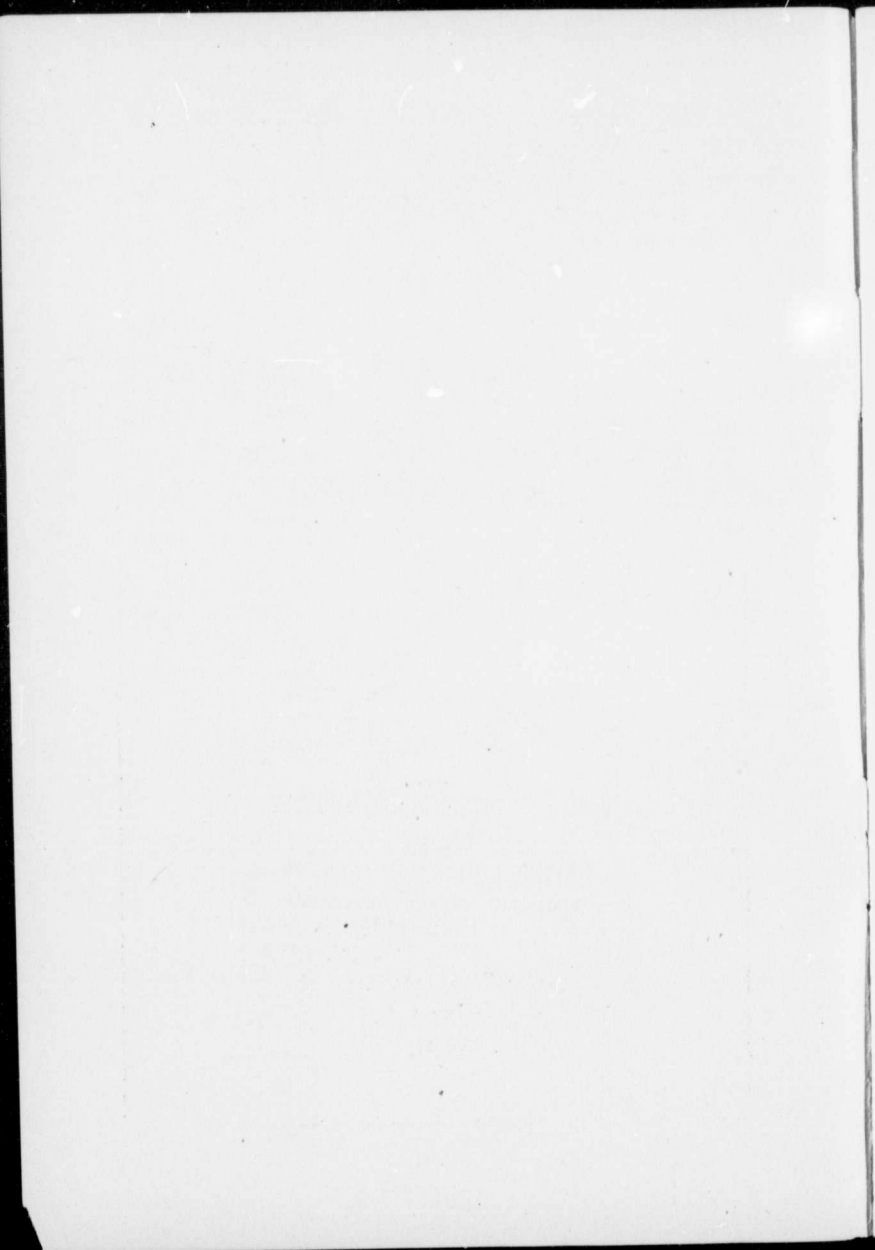
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By ESTHER MacGREGOR
(MARIAN KEITH)



1914
WOMAN'S MISSIONARY SOCIETY
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Happy Heart Comes to Canada

(*Founded on Facts*)

The big ocean steamship ploughed its way steadily westward through the Atlantic billows. There were a great many people on her decks and in her cabins and staterooms, some sad, some happy, but almost all of them hopeful; for most of them were going to a new home in a new land. The happiest and most hopeful of them all was a little girl, away back in the steerage. She was so happy she could not keep still a minute. She ran about the crowded deck, and danced and played hide-and-seek with the other little girls, and was so joyous all the long days that wherever she went she brought smiles and gladness.

When night came she was so tired out with a whole day's leaping and skipping about that she almost fell asleep as she helped her mother tuck away little Anna and baby Maria into their tiny berth. But she was never too sleepy to ask, as she tumbled in beside them, "Mamo, shall we get to Canada before morning?"

And the mother's dull, sad face would light up for a moment as she would answer, "No, not before morning. But we shall get to Canada soon, my Bronya."

Of course, those are not at all the words they used; for, as yet, the little girl's mother could speak not one word of English, and Bronya herself could speak just two. She had learned them the second day out on the ocean. On that morning there had come down to the steerage deck a very beautiful and richly dressed lady, at whom Bronya and all her little companions stared in deep admiration. The lady stood for some time, watching the children play, and then she asked the gentleman at her side, to bring her the dear little girl with the brown curls, who seemed

so merry. Bronya was the little girl, and she came very shyly, holding tightly to Anna's hand, and gazing in wonder at the shining silk of the lady's dress and her rich soft furs. The lady tried to talk to Bronya, but the little girl only shook her head and laughed, and the lady laughed too, and patted her curls and said: "Little Happy-Heart, Little Happy-Heart." Then she gave her some candy and went away up to her own deck.

Bronya gave half the candy to her little sisters, Anna and baby Maria, and the other half to her playmates. Then she ran swiftly about till she hunted up Sophia Kibort, and flung herself upon her.

"Sophia, what is 'Happy-Heart'?" she asked.

Sophia was a big good-natured girl, with a broad, dull face, but little Bronya thought her the cleverest young woman in the world. For Sophia had lived two long years in Canada, and was now crossing the ocean for the third time. And she could speak English, the little Russian girl thought, quite as well as any Canadian. Indeed, Sophia herself had said she could. Sophia liked to display her knowledge, so she answered good-naturedly:

"'Happy-Heart'? Why, that's you, Bronislava, because you are always jumping and laughing. You make people laugh always. You are 'Happy-Heart'."

Bronya was delighted with her English name, and she danced about the deck harder than ever, and said it over and over, until everyone in the steerage was calling her "Happy-Heart." And the little girl determined that, more than ever, she would be a Happy-Heart, and make her little sisters glad, and perhaps even chase away some of the hopelessness from her mother's face. It would be very easy to be happy in Canada, she felt sure, for all the neighbors at home had said that in Canada nobody was ever poor or out of work or hungry. And at that joyous thought little Bronya would fly to her mother and ask, for the twentieth time, "Oh, Mamo, do you think we shall get to Canada to-morrow?"

No wonder the little Polish girl was glad she was going to a country where it would be easy to be a Happy-Heart. For, though she was only eleven, she had had a hard struggle already

to keep bright and hopeful. Her first trouble had been school. Bronya had always longed to go to school and learn to read and write, and as soon as she was old enough her father sent her to the village teacher. He was a great tall man, with a cruel face, and he beat his pupils whenever he was cross, which was most of the time. So, of course, he beat little Bronya, until her hands were covered with black marks and her back with deep red ones. So the father took his little girl out of school, declaring he would one day kill the schoolmaster. It was a great disappointment to Bronya, and for a while she felt it would be quite impossible for one to be happy if one could not even read a book.

But a day came when even the cruelty of the teacher and the loss of school were driven from her mind. Times had been hard in the little Polish village, and her father had gone across the border into Germany with a number of men to work in the mines. And one dreadful day his dead body was brought home, mangled and torn from an explosion in the mine. For months after Bronya would awake suddenly in the night, fancying she heard again the wailings of the neighbor women and the shrieks of her mother.

It was then that the dull hopeless look had come into her mother's eyes, and it was then that little Happy-Heart had found happiness such a hard task. For now the father was gone, the family was very poor, and many a cold night Bronya and her little sister, shivering under their thin coverings, held each other tight to smother their sobs, so that their mother would not know they were crying with hunger.

Bronya had for years heard the neighbors talk of a wonderful land away across the sea, a land called Canada. It was a big, big country, they said, where people were not crowded on little farms, and where there was so much wheat grown it could not be harvested, and where no one ever went hungry. And she would say to her mother, when there was not enough to eat for supper, "Do not cry, Mamo, we will go to Canada some day, and then we shall all have more than we want to eat, and baby can have a new dress."

And sure enough, the wonderful dream came true, and they really did sail for Canada. Sophia Kibort and her brother Stanislav, who lived right next door to Bronya's home, had been two years in that great country, and that very autumn they had come home, stylishly dressed, and with thrilling tales of the wealth and the freedom and the happiness of the new land where they had lived. And the whole family of Kibort, father and mother and six other children, packed their belongings and prepared to go back to Canada with them.

And just then a relative of Bronya's mother, who had some wealth and a great deal of meanness, suddenly took the idea that it would be easier to give the widow some money once, to take her far away where she would not bother him any more, than to have to give her money many times at home. So that was how Bronya and her mother and two little sisters were with the Kibort family sailing for Canada.

And so no wonder little Happy-Heart ran about the deck and danced for joy. For was she not going to Canada? And to Bronya Romanoff, of a little village in Poland, Russia, Canada seemed a place very much like heaven, only much easier to reach. School teachers in Canada were all kind and good, she explained joyfully to little Anna. Sophia had told her they were. And they never beat you, even though you did not know your lessons. And nobody ever went hungry or ragged there. There was plenty of room and plenty of work and plenty of food for all.

The happy days on the steamer ended in the happiest of all, when there went a cry through the steerage that land had been sighted; and Bronya joined a shrieking rush of children to the railing to look out and "see Canada." For the next few days events happened so quickly, and scenes changed so rapidly, that Bronya was too bewildered to realize that they had really arrived. Their landing was like a strange dream, full of noise and confusion, and smothering, pushing crowds, with she and Anna clinging desperately to their mother's skirt, and a big cross man at every turn to shout something at them that nobody but Sophia Kibort could understand. Then there was a swift

train journey in the night, when she and Anna and baby Maria lay curled up on a hard seat, and last a big, crowded, dirty city, where they stopped,—the place that was to be their Canadian home.

Bronya had always been poor, but she had been brought up in a little Polish village, where there was plenty of room to run and play, and where they had a little garden and some chickens and a pig all their own. And of course, as Canada was such a wonderful, rich country, she had supposed their new home would be far prettier than anything she had ever seen in Russia. So it was rather hard for little Happy-Heart to keep on being quite so radiant when she found that their new home was one dark room in the back of the Kibort's cellar. But, indeed, her mother explained, they might be glad to get that; for there were many people in the city and so few houses, that they would be thankful for even one cellar room when the long cold winter set in.

So little Happy-Heart settled down bravely in the dark room. It had one tiny cobwebbed window, and an old sagging door opening out upon a sagging stair that led up into a tiny yard. The yard was piled with garbage and old tin cans, and when it rained the water ran down into the cellar, but nobody but the people in the cellar seemed to care. The men who ruled and looked after this big city did not mean to be cruel to Bronya and her family; they were just so busy about their own affairs that they forgot that other people must have houses to live in. So Bronya had to live in a cellar. Her mother bought a tiny stove and a bed, and Mr. Kibort made them a table out of an old box, and kind-hearted Mrs. Kibort gave them a cupboard. Then Bronya's mother made a sort of hanging cradle for Maria out of old sacks, which she fastened by ropes to the wall, and they were all ready for housekeeping.

Little Happy-Heart tried her best to be merry in her uncomfortable quarters. She did not mind the dampness and the darkness so much, but two things troubled her greatly. First, there was no place to play. Her mother was afraid to let her little ones run on the street, and the yard was too small for even one

skip. The other thing was the terrible noises at night. The Kibort family lived above them and in the front part of the cellar, and though the house was small, they found the rent hard to pay. So, to help pay it, they took in a half dozen men lodgers. These men came home late at night, and drank and fought in the room above, and Bronya and her mother would sometimes lie awake half the night, trembling with terror of the horrible sounds.

As long as their mother was with them, matters were not so bad. But of course the mother had to find work to keep her children alive. For a long time she went from place to place seeking work, and at last, when her little hoard of money was almost gone, she found something to do. It was work in a hat factory. The pay was not more than would keep them barely alive, but it was the best she could get. She had to get up very early in the morning, sometimes before Bronya was out of bed, and always before Anna and baby Maria were awake, and she did not come back until long after six o'clock in the evening.

All through the long lonely days while she was away, Bronya did the work of the one room, and tended her little sisters. She was only eleven, and the care of a family and the damp dark cellar began to tell on her health and her spirits. She grew stooped with carrying the heavy baby about, and often she did not care that there was no place to play in, for she was too tired to think of running and skipping. But she never complained, and always tried to be a real Happy-Heart when her poor mother came home worn out, and the drunken carousings upstairs commenced.

One day, as a great treat, her mother allowed her to bring her little sisters to visit her at the factory during the noon hour, when she and the other women were eating their mid-day meal. The distance was too far to carry the baby, but Mrs. Kibort borrowed a tiny cart from a neighbor baby for Bronya, and with baby Maria in it they set off in high spirits. Bronya had by this time learned to speak quite a few English words—far more than her mother—and could ask the way if they got lost. Anna, too, could say a number of English words, of which they were

very proud. But the whole family was puzzled over baby Maria's case. She was just learning to talk, and spoke a mixture of English and Polish and baby-talk that nobody could understand, and that kept her little sisters in shrieks of laughter. She had learned to say "Hello" just as well as if she were a Canadian baby, and all the way to the factory, as they trundled her along, she called out, "Hello, hello, hello!" until her little sisters could hardly pull her for laughing. It was the best time they had had since coming to Canada.

Their mother met them at the factory door, and her sad face lit up as the baby called "Hello, Mamo," and leaped to meet her. The factory was a great, dingy, dusty place, with bare cobwebbed windows and discolored walls. The windows and the doors had to be kept tightly shut all the time the work was going on, for the air would spoil the beautiful hats that were made there. The people who made these hats and the people who wore them did not mean to be cruel to Bronya's mother by shutting her up in that airless place. Many of them were Christian people. But they were just so busy making money and wearing beautiful hats that they hadn't time to bother thinking whether anyone was killed in making these hats or not.

But Bronya thought of that dingy factory many times in the months that followed. She always thought of it when she was wakened in the night by her mother's coughing. She would wonder if she had taken a cold, and would put out her little hand to pat her mother's face, and would be surprised to find it very hot, even when the nights were chilly.

They did not go to the factory any more, as the walk was too long, but almost every day Bronya carried the baby, and with Anna trotting beside, they would walk up one street and along another—a pretty shady one—and watch the boys and girls playing in the big school yard. Bronya had not yet started to school, though she longed to go. A big man had come to the door one day, and had told Mrs. Kibort something in a very loud voice, pointing to Bronya and Anna. Sophia was away at work, and Mrs. Kibort did not know what he was talking about. But

Bronya's heart leaped, for she had caught the word "school" many times. Perhaps this man wanted her and Anna to go, she said hopefully. She told her mother about it when she returned, and the mother said, as always:

"Next week I will get you a dress, and Anna boots—then, perhaps, you can go." But next week, as every week, there was no money to buy dresses or boots. There was scarcely enough to pay for something to eat and to give Mrs. Kibort the weekly rent. For Mr. Kibort was drinking, and he grew very cross and threatening if the payment was but a day behind. But Bronya still hoped that she would go some day, and very often she took her two little sisters up the wide shady street to where the school stood, just to look at the children playing.

One day it was so cold standing out there in the wind, that the children slipped shyly up the steps and looked in at the door. It was the play-hour, and a group of little girls were dancing about the big airy hall, playing "The Farmer in the Dell." Bronya drew nearer with shining eyes. She did not quite understand the words the little girls were singing, but she knew that game. She had played it often away back in the Polish village that had been her home. Just then a little girl in a pretty pink frock and a dainty big pink bow bobbing on top of her curls, the very prettiest and best-dressed little girl of all the dancing circle, stopped right in front of Bronya. She looked at the little foreigner's long coarse dress and her clumsy boots, at the ragged shawl tied round little Anna's curls, and at the baby with the dirty face and the trowsled hair, whom Bronya held in her arms;—and this little Canadian girl who was so well cared for at home, and upon whom the little Polish girl looked with such eager admiration, this little Canadian girl turned to her companions and said something. The whole circle whirled round and stared at Anna's feet—poor little Anna, who was wearing a pair of Sophia Kibort's cast-off shoes—and everyone burst into shrieks of merry laughter.

Bronya hurried her little sisters away, her heart bursting with shame and disappointment. She had always looked to the school and the little playmates she would have there as a refuge

from all the trouble she was enduring. When she went to school everything would be all right, and they would all be happy as the day was long. And now, school was a place where the little girls laughed at you! It was more than little Happy-Heart could bear. She broke down completely when her mother came home from the factory, and sobbed on her shoulder.

"Oh, Mamo," she wailed, "the little girls, the little Canadian girls—they laughed at Anna and baby and me!"

Her mother stroked her little daughter's curls helplessly. It was a terrible thing to see brave Bronya give way.

"Ah, child," she said, "I wish we never came to Canada. We were better in Poland." And in her grief Bronya felt like agreeing with her.

Of course, like all the other people who were cruel to Bronya and her family, the little Canadian girls had not meant to be cruel. But they were cruel, nevertheless, quite heartless indeed, as all people, little or big, always are, unless they take pains to be kind.

Bronya did not take her little sisters to the school any more after that, and, indeed, the days were getting so cold they did not care to leave the cellar so long as there was any coal to make a fire. The long Canadian winter had set in, and the nights were bitterly cold.

One dark morning Bronya awoke with little Maria crying with the cold. She sprang out of the bed where they all slept, and was surprised to find her mother still asleep. A faint light through the cellar window told her that her mother should have gone to the factory long ago.

"Mamo, Mamo," she cried, shaking her gently, "See, the daylight has come!"

But her mother did not answer, and the little girl suddenly became frightened—she did not know why. She felt her mother's hands—they were cold as ice. Some vague idea of disaster sent Bronya flying up the stair and into the room above, where Mrs. Kibort was preparing breakfast.

“Come, come quick!” was all she could gasp as she clutched the woman’s dress. “There is something wrong with our mother.”

Yes, there was something sadly wrong with the poor, overworked mother. The long hours in the stifling factory, the damp cellar, poor food and continued anxiety for her children had done their work, and the little girls were motherless.

The days that followed were like a dreadful dream to the little girl, who had once been called Happy-Heart. When they took her mother away that heart seemed to become dead, and Bronya felt that she could never care about anything again. But she found she was mistaken. About a week after, there came to the cellar a kind-faced woman, who asked all about the children. Mrs. Kibort, in her broken English, explained that there was no one but herself to care for them, that she had a hard enough struggle to keep her own family, but that if something was done for the two little ones, she would keep Bronya and bring her up for her mother’s sake. And the good-hearted woman put her apron to her eyes at the mention of her lost neighbor.

So in a few days more another lady and a gentleman came and took away Anna and baby Maria in the name of the Children’s Aid Society. They were to have a good home, their older sister was assured, and plenty to eat. Bronya was only eleven, but she knew that her two little sisters would probably starve if they were left to her care, and that it was impossible that Mrs. Kibort, with her big family and her drunken husband, could take them all. But when they were taken from her, it seemed this time as if her heart would burst.

She clung to them till the last minute, and when the carriage drove away with them, she ran out and down the street after it, sobbing and crying, “Oh, Anna, come back! Baby, come back! Oh, don’t leave me all alone!” She ran on and on frantically, so blinded by her tears that she did not see that the carriage had disappeared. Her uncovered hair was blown about by the wind, and her little bare hands were blue with the cold, but she still ran on and cried and called until she was exhausted. She

passed a big building where a crowd of little girls were tripping down the steps, laughing and chattering. Bronya thought it must be a school, but she was too sad and sick to care if the little girls laughed at her. She did not know that it was a church, and that the little girls so well dressed and pretty who were coming down the steps were members of a Mission Band, who had set themselves together to help just such little girls as Bronya. But, like lots of other little girls who go to Mission Bands, they forgot that they must be true missionaries every minute of the day, or they cannot be true members of a Band. These little girls were not quite so cruel as the little girls at the school had been, but they were not quite as kind as they might have been. They drew away and whispered that there was a little foreign girl, and that she was very, very dirty, and why did she wear such a queer long dress? But there was one little girl who was too polite to stare, and too kind to let the poor little foreigner pass. She ran down the steps and caught hold of Bronya's stiff little hand.

"Oh, please, won't you come in and get warmed?" she cried. She did not know what else to say, but she felt she must do something for this poor half-frozen little girl, with the tear-swollen face.

Bronya followed her obediently, more because she did not care where she went, now that everything was lost. They entered a small warm room, where a few of the little girls were lingering about a teacher, who was seated at her table talking to them. The teacher wore a trim blue dress and a tiny blue bonnet on her fluffy brown hair. And Bronya, looking at her, felt a faint hope arise in her crushed heart. The lady took both her cold hands in her warm ones and drew her up to the radiator.

"Why, you poor frozen mite!" she cried. Bronya understood the words only partially, but she understood the tone thoroughly. The unexpected kindness brought the big tears welling to her eyes. She clutched her long blue pinafore in her shaking hands, and covering her face, broke into great heaving sobs. The kind teacher in the little blue bonnet put her arms around her and held the little quivering figure close until her sobs grew quieter.

"What is it, dear?" she asked, patting her gently. But Bronya could only sob over and over, "Mamo, Anna, Baby! All gone. Me left! Me all alone!"

The little girl who had brought her in, crept close and stroked her hand. "What is your name?" she whispered softly. Bronya looked up quickly. This was the first little Canadian girl who had really spoken to her kindly. She was just going to say, "Bronislava Romanoff," when she remembered that the little Canadian girls on the street had laughed at her name. She hesitated, and then remembering her English name, the one the lady had given her on the steamer, she whispered, with a big heaving sigh, "My name Happy-Heart."

"Happy-Heart!" The teacher's eyes filled with tears, as she repeated the name. "Oh, poor little Happy-Heart," she said, "how did you get your name?"

Little by little, in halting English, Happy-Heart told her story—the story of the high hopes of what Canada was to be, and the bitter disappointment. And when she had finished, the little story-teller's eyes were the only ones that were dry. But Bronya had cried so much she could cry no more.

When Bronya was wrapped up warmly and led back home, the deaconess who took her found Mrs. Kibort's portly figure filling up the doorway. The woman had been anxious over the little girl's absence, and was relieved at seeing her again. The sight of the baby's empty hammock overcame Bronya again, and she crept away in silent misery to a corner of the ragged bed.

In the best English she could muster, Mrs. Kibort repeated the little girl's sad tale. And while she told it the bright eyes under the blue bonnet were taking in all the signs of poverty in the poor little home. They saw more than poverty, too; they saw that, of all the cruel things that had been done to poor little Happy-Heart, the cruelest thing would be to leave her with Mrs. Kibort. Not that Mrs. Kibort was unkind.

"Me keep Bronislava," she repeated over and over. "Me take care of her. Her mudder my friend." But the little

deaconess shook her head. She knew what that crowded, dirty house, with its rough lodgers, its dunkeness and sin, and outside only a low street to play in, would do for poor little Bronya.

The Mission Band was surprised to be called to a special meeting on the very next day after they had just met. Everyone came, out of curiosity. Perhaps Miss Erskine was going to get up a concert or a skating party. But their little deaconess president had a far finer scheme on hand that they ever dreamed—It was that they should adopt "Happy-Heart" for their very own, and see that she had a good clean Christian up-bringing. It was a big undertaking, but the little girls did not fail. Mothers and fathers had to be consulted first, of course; but that did not take long, and in a wonderfully short time Bronya was the adopted child of a Home Mission Band. They found a good home for her in the country with a dear motherly woman to care for her, and now the members of that Mission Band are scrimping and saving their candy money and their rink ticket money and their ribbon money, and, in fact, all their good-time money, so that their adopted child may go to school.

Bronya is growing up tall and straight. You might see her any day, dancing along the country road, swinging her school bag. Yes, dancing, for she is beginning to be Happy-Heart once more. She is going to be a teacher, she says, and then she will make money enough to get Anna and Maria out of the Home, and take them to live with her, and the Mission Band are determined that she shall not be disappointed.

So Happy-Heart is really a Happy-Heart at last, all through the unselfishness of one little Home Mission Band. And in making one little Polish girl happy, they have made themselves happy, too—happier than they ever were in their lives before. For the real President of that Band looks down from heaven and says, "Inasmuch as ye did this great kindness to one little Polish girl, ye did it unto Me!"